

# CAERULEUS

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*First Printing: 2016*

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*ISBN 978-1-365-52551-3*

*Island Sun, Inc.*

*1313 Mockingbird Ln, Raleigh, NC 27607*



*For those who taught me what I have yet to forget*





## Prologue

Councilman Cyprian Purpura was always considered to be a pillar of the community. He was popular because of the jobs and prosperity his sapphire mine brought to the town, as well as the way he vanquished the mightiest warriors from the rival township of Ostia Major.

Despite having decapitated three men, (two in battle and one in gladiatorial sport) slashed the throat of a thief in his home, and bludgeoned to death a drunk who had insulted his wife, Cyprian never considered himself to be a killer.

Not of people anyway.

And certainly not of the woman who lived in the small cottage on the southern edge of town.

Her name, or rather her alias, was Seneca. She lived with her husband and their young, adopted daughter, and together they tended a garden famed throughout the region for producing some of the rarest and most useful herbs and fruits, many of which refused to grow anywhere else.

Cyprian knew he couldn't kill her. It was a widely known fact that it was impossible to kill an immortal goddess.

But he was curious to see what would happen if he tried.

So he unsheathed his knife, which was made of polished amethyst, and studied the way it gleamed in the moonlight for the fifth time that night.

The other councilmen watched him anxiously.

There were nine of them there in total, wielding an assortment of blades and knives. The tenth Councilmember, Pygmalion, had refused to come. He had also refused to explain why.



That was what made the others anxious. They constantly wondered if he knew something they didn't.

But then, they all knew he was a queer one in the head.

So they followed Councilman Purpura because the logical and more ambitious part of their minds told them to.

They followed him into the warm summer night, where the air was full of pollen and fluttering insects, and the sky was filled with distant stars and nebulae without a cloud to be seen.

It was such a peaceful night to fulfill their plans of debauchery.

As if compelled by some unseen instrument of time, Cyprian chose that moment to point his knife forward, giving his peers the signal to proceed.

The nine leaders of the town went forth, creeping towards the little cottage on the hill.

Cyprian and two of the other councilmen walked directly to the front door, while all the rest approached by the rear. He knocked politely as they hid their knives.

After a moment, they heard the sound of a bolt being drawn back, and the door opened to reveal their target.

She looked surprised.

"Councilman Purpura...what an honor," she said. "My apologies. I expected no one at this hour."

He just smiled and asked, "Would you be so inclined to invite us in?"

The woman who called herself Seneca opened the door wider and let them inside.

She was well regarded as a beautiful woman, and many a man, present councilmen included, were envious of her husband. She had grey eyes, freckled skin, tawny hair, a shapely body and an earthy feel from the dirt beneath her fingernails and worn spots around the knees of her dress.



However, the councilmen weren't there because of how she appeared.

"My husband shall return soon," said Seneca as she led them to their kitchen, where various dried-out plants hung from the ceiling and coals from the fire were smoldering in the fireplace. "However, I can lend you my skills in the interim. Is there an herb you require from the garden?"

"No, not at all," said Cyprian just as a young girl with light brown skin and a simple white dress sleepily came into the room.

"Are you going to tuck me in, Mater?" she asked, rubbing her eyes.

"I shall be right there. Just go back to bed," replied Seneca.

Her daughter spared a curious glance to the councilmen, but then went back to her room as she had been told.

"I am sorry, but what did you gentlemen come here for?"

Cyprian smiled. "We know what you are," he told her simply.

She paused, but didn't betray any emotion. "I have naught the slightest idea as to what you mean."

"Is that so?" he continued. "As there is a series of events that have led us to believe that you know precisely what we mean. Ursacille, if you would please," he indicated to the councilman next to him.

He stepped forward at the mention of his name and cleared his throat.

"We have, of course, the tale of the brook which was turned to wine for over a week, oddly enough, coinciding with the butcher accidentally crushing your hand in the door. Then there were the birds which burst into flames and left an egg or two in the ashes after your husband said you had been bitten by a snake in the woods. And let us not forget that old orchard by the river, whose farmer, as we all know, hated his peach trees with a passion, and had them somewhat mysteriously replaced with apple trees



the same time you wore a bandage on your hand after cutting it in your garden,” he listed. “The pattern of all these things, of a woman whose injuries changes the nature of the world itself, is peculiar in its resemblance to a certain myth we teach our children.”

“And last but not least,” said Cyprian smugly, “I overheard your dear husband use your real name the last time I was here.”

“Perhaps you misheard, and I am only the troublesome magician who cast a spell on all those things,” she suggested, refusing to concede their insinuations quite yet.

“We both know there is no such thing as magic,” replied Cyprian. “Not yet anyway.” He slipped his knife out of his sheath, as did his fellow councilmen.

The woman they called Seneca frowned. “I see...Well, in that case...” she slowly raised her finger, pointing at the councilman on Cyprian’s left. “I revoke thee.”

And just like that, he collapsed, his eyes rolling into his head without a hint of life in them.

She pointed to the man on Cyprian’s right. “And thee as well.”

The effect repeated itself.

By now, Cyprian had overcome his shock at how swiftly his comrades had fallen and began to rush forward to attack.

There was no way for him to reach her before she uttered the fatal words, but he got lucky. The councilmen who had entered through the back door tackled her to the ground.

She tried to say the words anyway, but by then it was too late. Her impact with the floor was enough to injure her, meaning her power to steal back human life was subdued.

The councilmen grabbed her by her wrists and ankles and hoisted her up onto the kitchen table, while she struggled and screamed all the way.





The noise brought her daughter running back into the kitchen. “Mater!” she shouted in terror. “What are you doing to her!?”

One of the less occupied councilmen grabbed her by the shoulder and held her back.

“You know, Veritas, the old stories say that a single cut to your heart gave you and your husband the power to make all the life on earth,” said Cyprian, holding his dagger over her. “I wonder what a couple more would do.”

“No!” she shouted, but she couldn’t stop the numerous blades from plunging into her flesh.

She arched her back in pain, but no blood poured out from her wounds, and suddenly, it was not flesh which they had stabbed.

Her skin became inky darkness, and her freckles became stars and her eyes became nebulas. The humble kitchen became awash in different colors, including several that hadn’t existed before that moment.

As Cyprian’s blade pierced her heart, the councilmen felt a great power flow through them. One that very nearly made them masters of reality itself.

It was too bad that a greater power smashed itself through the front door and began to slaughter the councilmen. That power being Veritas’ husband.

Summarily, all the councilmen but Cyprian, who was quick to jump out a window, died in brutal retribution: with many limbs and heads parting from their respective bodies in the process. But what was done could not be undone.

For Cyprian Purpura never regarded himself a killer of humans. Where once he was only the killer of lesser creatures, he was now the killer of worlds as well. Specifically, the world before the goddess of truth was struck down.





## Chapter One

### The Grey of Night

Phantoms were afoot in the city. They were the blood on the front page of the newspapers. The horror in the assembly. The quite anxiety in well furnished offices. The suspicion in crystal mansions. And the hunger lurking in the shadows.

Lonely souls wished they could be phantoms. Phantoms, like smoke and mist, were enticing, ephemeral, never tiring, never there in the empty moments. And in that way, there was never a lonely soul and a phantom in the same place at the same time. For where did one think phantoms come from?

On the cobblestone roads drifts a phantom, spooking the families in the desolate apartment buildings, spooking everyone. The legend is a hope that hitches breath, a currier for a simple, deadly message. But even the mightiest of phantoms will disappear in good time, and before long there will be a lonely soul in its place.

Such as the one which walks on the street-side in the greyish din of the city's light.

The light brown trench coat he wore was stained with food, ink, mud, various unidentifiable fluids, and had a rather inconvenient tear over the right elbow. His hair was unkempt, and he would have appeared like a regular drunk to anyone he passed, walking with an inebriated-looking sway, hands stuffed in his pockets. He could see his breath in the brisk, late autumn air as vivid as if it came out a factory's smokestack.

Slowly, he staggered to a stop and leaned against the building to his right, letting out a pitiful groan.



“Maybe this is a dream,” he said hopefully, “Yeah...that’s it. I’m actually asleep, wrapped in warm blankets...cuddling with a stuffed toy bear, having a nice, calm, black and dreamless night.”

He paused, as if waiting to wake up. Nothing happened.

“Shut up, Atticus,” he mumbled to himself, forcing himself to walk on.

The path was illuminated with cast iron street lamps built like ornate Corinthian columns, and an electric light was at the center of their elaborate curling petals. His eyes drifted to the buildings that reflected the dim light as he meandered on.

Every towering edifice was made out of solid stone or gem that glowed in the lamp light. It was rumored that there wasn’t a single rock left under Caeruleus City. The greed of the ancient aristocracy had plowed and mined every last jewel to make their homes, and had reduced the vast mineral wealth to the buildings that Atticus trudged past unceremoniously.

He glanced to his eerie, distorted shadow reflecting against a ruby wall. Atticus pulled his coat tighter around himself and walked into the road to get away from the ghoulish figure.

“Why is the Senatorial District always so damn empty at night?” he complained to no one in particular. He found it particularly detestable that a city as big as this one could make one feel more solitary than they already were.

He approached a wide, cobblestone bridge and slowed when he caught sight of two Praetorian Guards wearing rich violet cloaks over their pale purple uniforms. They leaned up against the bridge railing, playing tic-tac-toe with a piece of gravel and the sandstone ledge. They both raised an eyebrow at the incoming citizen.

“Hold it right there,” said one of them, putting out an arm.

“What seems to be the problem, Guards?”



“You’re crossing into the Plebian District after sundown. We need proof of residence in the Senatorial District,” replied the Praetorian.

Atticus narrowed his eyes suspiciously as his training as a law student tried to put something together in his mind.

“No one’s ever stopped me before.”

“Its new orders from the Tribune of Justice,” replied the guard.

Reluctantly, Atticus reached into his coat and pulled out his student identification card.

“Hey, listen kid. You sure you want to go into the Plebian District? In case you haven’t heard, the place is rife with muggers, thieves and Anarchists. We cannot guarantee your safety.”

Atticus tried not to roll his eyes in front of the Praetorians. He had been going to the Plebian District at night several times a month for the past six years.

He snatched back his card and strode past the Guards, mumbling something that sounded an awful lot like, “I wonder if competent law enforcement would make a difference.”

They went back to their tic-tac-toe.

Crossing over the Sominculus River felt like crossing into a foreign country. On one side were buildings of jewels and on the other side were tenant buildings made from wood, plaster and rusty iron spars that jutted up like crooked teeth with the occasional concrete filling.

He stumbled past all rickety buildings, taking a right here, and a left there, not particularly caring which way he went. It never really mattered. Usually, he would be able to find his way back. Although there was one time he had to spend the night in a public graveyard mausoleum...

This District was still alive with deliveries to be made, goods to vendor, and labor to be labored. A group of homeless men huddled around a fire in the mouth of an alley. Others moved



in the shadows. Atticus ignored them all, and no one paid much attention to him.

He rounded the corner and realized this street was a little different from the others. He staggered forward with his tired walk, and found himself in an empty lot surrounded by three concrete walls covered with colorful graffiti.

He had half a mind to keep walking and not lose his precious momentum, but curiosity held him in place.

Scrawled across the off-white walls were lines like:

“PRAETORIANS—THE GREATEST MURDERERS IN CAERULEUS”

“TAKE DOWN THE CAPITOL!”

“SPQC”

“DEATH TO THE CONSULS”

“THUS ALWAYS THE TYRANTS—BULLYING THOSE BELOW THEM” and a red colored “A” painted messily in bold print.

Anarchist propaganda. The whole district was their stomping ground.

He was about to move on when he noticed something else off to the side. It was a painting of a man’s silhouette, tall and hooded, with color emanating from his hands.

Atticus squinted at it, trying to understand what it meant.

Beneath it were the words “HE WALKS THE NIGHT” smeared in bright blue.

Unbeknownst to him, a man of phantoms approached.

“Nice art, huh?” he said.

Atticus jumped, his startled heart panicking for a moment. He clutched his hand over his chest as if to prevent anything from rupturing.

The intruder looked a couple years older than Atticus. There was a shadow of stubble across his cheeks, and his long, wavy black hair was pulled back in a ponytail. He wore a thick



wool jacket to protect himself from the night's chill, and had a large brown satchel at his side.

He took a step back at Atticus' surprise. "You alright there?"

"Oh, yeah, I'm fine. Quite fine. Just wasn't expecting that. Great art! Really good."

"I know the person who painted it," replied the man. "They're pretty talented. In fact, I think I know pretty much everybody who drew something here...not many people pay attention to what they create," he said, motioning to the scrawlings and depictions all around them.

"What is it?" asked Atticus.

"What is what?"

"That man." He pointed to the silhouette.

"You don't know?"

Atticus blinked and shook his head. Was he supposed to know?

"It's the Nocturne Magician."

Atticus kept looking at him blankly.

"I thought everybody had heard about him by now. He walks the Plebian District at night, performing stuff. Usually his magic leaves something behind, making objects out of thin air. They say none of the magicians in the E/M District can even compare."

Atticus glanced back to the picture, his tired mind trying to understand.

"I guess you could say he's become a hero for some people," continued the stranger.

"How many are there?"

The stranger looked at Atticus oddly. "It's 'the' Nocturne Magician. There's only one."

"Sorry...just really out of it right now. I haven't gotten much sleep lately."



“Then maybe you should go get some rest. I’m sure the paintings will look a lot better in the morning,” he said.

“Can’t. My insomnia’s been acting up,” replied Atticus.

“Still, it isn’t always a good idea to be roaming at night around here. Sure I can handle myself, but hey.” The spooky man smiled and slid his hands into his coat pockets. “I’m me. Not everybody out here is exactly a follower of Virtus. Best to watch out.”

“I’ve never had much trouble before. Never even bumped into an Anarchist.” Atticus nodded to the red **A** painted onto the wall.

“Well I’m rooting for them. No one else has ever stood up to the Aristocrats and Industrialists in the Senate like they have. Who are you rooting for?” asked the man.

Atticus smiled and shrugged. “Too tired for rooting and cheering anybody on, really.”

“Ah come on. You must have some opinion, it’s the fate of our world at stake you know,” he said, as if he didn’t care either. As if there wasn’t blood in the tread of his boots.

“They don’t really teach you about anarchism in school, man,” said Atticus as his gaze went back to the art.

“I can’t imagine why.”

“Hehe, yeah.”

“Here’s a quick lesson for you,” he turned and pointed at his impromptu student with mock gusto. “The modern anarchy movement is based off the writings and work of Pilleus Aurelius, one of the original revolutionaries who overthrew the monarchy who believed that legislation and economic authority should be controlled by everyone it effected, not because or right or wrong, or justice or injustice but exactly because he thought none of that stuff existed. And that people should fight for that power, tooth and nail, destroy governments and states and gods if they dare stand in the way, all just because they can.”





“What a guy!”

“Indeed.”

“How did you learn all that?” asked Atticus.

“I read a book, you should try it sometime.”

“I’ll take it under advisement.”

“Well, I’ve still got a package to deliver.” He motioned to his satchel. “Just so you know, the name’s Traj. Traj Catulli.”

He offered Atticus his hand.

“Atticus,” he said, shaking the hand. “And I should probably go and walk some more. Don’t quite feel like collapsing yet.”

Traj nodded with a little chuckle, and the two lonely souls went separate ways.

Atticus heard Traj’s footsteps fade away behind him as he continued his stumbling path down the road. To his left and right he noticed an old man closing his shop, and a homeless man wrapped in a worn old blanket.

He sighed, a part of himself wanting to fall down and drift to sleep in the shadows right then and there. But he had to forge on.

Of the windows on the buildings around him, some were open, some closed, some dark, some bright, but there was only one that had an occupant.

Dim golden light poured out and over a little girl sitting in the windowsill. She had her back against one side, and her feet against the other, boxing herself in as if she was a stained glass figure.

“We can’t keep going like this,” a man’s voice wafted down from the window.

Atticus furrowed his brow, spying a teardrop slip down the child’s cheek.

“Well, it’s worked for ten years,” said a desperate woman from the room.



“You know we don’t have enough money. The mill cut our pay by five Sesterces again,” said the man.

Atticus cocked his head, trying to eavesdrop on the conversation better. It seemed the two were the little girl’s parents.

“They can’t do that,” the mother protested.

“And what’s stopping them, exactly?” asked the father.

“We can’t send her to work, she’s too young.”

“Half her friends are already in the factories,” the father said flatly.

“That doesn’t change anything.”

“In less than three weeks we won’t have money to buy food! We’ll all starve and that will be the end of it,” said the father, louder than before.

The mother grew silent, finally yielding to the inevitable.

“Where will she go?” she asked softly.

“The textile factory always has a few openings,” her husband told her, diluted remorse stained on his words.

The girl closed her eyes and curled her dirty, barefoot toes.

Atticus saw another tear roll down her cheek, and a pang of sadness touched his heart.

He wanted to do something. Anything to keep the girl out of the Caerulean factories that would make her smell like chemicals, smoke and metals, stealing so much of her youth, and leaving her as tired as an insomniac roaming the streets.

But Atticus wasn’t sure what he could do to help her. His mind just wasn’t up to the task. He felt so defeated, standing there dumb.

Suddenly, inspiration struck him. He started off to the other side of the street, newfound purpose invigorating every step.

A tingling rush of emotion flooded his body, the same kind of euphoria that rises with the crescendo of a powerful song. The exact same feeling he needed for magic.



He would need a poem to submit his claim to the universe. To be the medium for what he felt. So he chose one he knew would fit perfectly.

He slapped his hands against the concrete wall opposite the little girl's window. He smiled excitedly, letting a brief bout of nervousness seize his chest before he began.

His voice rang out across the night.

*"Do you know when an imaginary friend is born?*

*Can you tell the tick of time? Or the precise pitch of the pendulum?*

*The solitary second when whimsy is whisked together in your head?"*

Everyone on the street turned their heads, looking at the man pressing his palms madly against the side of a building. Even the little girl paused her tears, and glanced down.

For a brief second, Atticus felt afraid it wouldn't work.

But then colors began to drip from his hands, draping across the off-white concrete.

He grinned and smeared his hands across the wall, sending the colors every which way.

*"Isn't it marvelous when we see our thoughts fly and twist through our minds?*

*Watch them flip, flap and flop! And behold their spinning spiggled spangle!*

*But perhaps...there's a chance...it would be so much more fun to dance with them."*

Atticus slid his hands back and forth, painting pictures and shapes with the colors. People began to take shape along the wall.

In the center was a woman with pale white hair and fair skin, like the northerners. A simple stola fell around her body to her ankles. To her left was a woman of southern ore, with brown skin and a tiny smile, and to her right was a man of western descendency, with dark black skin and a business man's three piece



suit. At the bottom was a small, furry, tabby cat, prowling between the painted people's legs.

He looked into the closed eyes of the northern woman and placed his hands against hers on the wall. It was time to really get started.

With a mighty heave, Atticus pulled back, dragging the painted people out of the wall and into the third dimension. He found himself nose to nose with a ghostly apparition of a woman, with glowing translucent skin. She opened her eyes. They were sky blue, and stared unabashed at the magician.

They recited together.

*"We can see with young new eyes, walking hand in hand,  
Pretending the streets we stride on are made of sapphire."*

Atticus and the apparition held hands as if they were dancing a waltz, moving in time as they walked onto the street. The second their feet touched the cracked pavement, a dazzling light encompassed the road.

The watchers shielded their eyes.

When the light abated, the simple Plebian District street had been transformed into a stream of gleaming crystallized sapphire. Even the weeds and the discarded soup can by the curb were changed.

They all stared at the spectacle, not entirely sure what was happening, only sure that it was something they had never seen before. The girl wiped her wet cheeks with her wrist and watched with wide eyes.

The ghostly man in the three piece suit sat beside the homeless one curled up in a blanket. He handed him a few pieces of sapphire weeds he plucked from the pavement, and wrapped his translucent arm around the man, doing his best to keep him warm in the chilly air.

The southern woman walked to the shopkeeper and shook his hand. The shopkeeper, though uneasy at first, lit up as they



struck up a conversation about the proper way to fold socks before sale.

And the little tabby cat clawed its way up the side of the building to the second floor window with the girl. The girl's eyes grew wide with surprise as the cat crawled into her lap. She hugged the pet, who nuzzled her back.

Atticus and his new friend danced in the street. It was a slow, awkward, clunky movement, and he knew he probably looked stupid. But having a partner to share the dance with, it made sure he no longer felt alone. It gave him strength.

He let go of the woman and stepped back to admire his handiwork for a moment. His lips twitched into a smile.

*"With what lenses will those other eyes see?  
Humor?"*

The southern woman and the shopkeeper laughed to each other.

*"Kindness?"*

The cat and the businessman pulled their friends closer.

*"Love?"*

Atticus felt something touch his hands, and looked up to see his dancing partner. There was a smile on her face that said she wasn't done quite yet. She pulled him in, and kissed him.

The affection took Atticus by surprise and sent him blushing wildly. He hesitated for a second, but then cupped her cheeks and returned the act.

When their lips parted, they declared the final lines of the poem.

*"It is this minuscule moment, this solitary second,  
This tick of time, and this precise pitch of the pendulum  
When an imaginary friend is born."*

Atticus held the apparition in his arms. His shoulders moved up and down, and his deep, adrenaline-fueled breathes began to slow down.



And as his breath slowed, the sapphire began to relax from its crystal state and the apparitions began to fade away. He watched as the sky blue eyes of his dancing partner disappeared.

She took with her the strength and energy he had mustered.

All the remaining eyes were on him.

He put his arms down and sighed.

He noticed that the empty soup can by the curb refused to change back. Stooping down, he picked it up, and examined it briefly. The odd, cylindrical jewel was flawless. He had managed to do something useful after all.

Atticus made towards the little girl's window, resuming his tired, swaying movement and clumsily tossed the can up to the girl. She caught it, but kept staring at him.

He sent her a small wave, his piece said, and sauntered on, down the street and deeper into the grey of night. The onlookers watched curiously as he faded away.

When he was out of earshot the girl dashed off of her windowsill and into the room, with her sapphire soup can.

"Mommy, daddy!" she exclaimed. "I just saw the Nocturne Magician!"

At the far end of the street, not far from where Atticus had done his performance, Traj Catulli stepped out of the shadows, his brow furrowed pensively.

"Huh..." he said, thinking over what he had just seen.

In the small tavern behind him, a black man in a leather jacket took one last swig of his bear and then made for the door after slapping down some cash on the counter.

He stepped through the exit to find his friend waiting for him.

"What's up General Trajan?" he asked, leaning against the threshold.

"Nothing much, Crassus....just got myself a bit of an idea for later," replied Traj.



“Is the plan still on for tonight?”

“Yeah, we’re on,” said Traj.

Crassus nodded and extended his arm out. They both grasped each other by the forearm and shook on it.

“For freedom!” declared Crassus.

Traj smiled. “For anarchy!”

Traj’s jacket slid down on his wrist, exposing a single red tattoo. The letter A.

Atticus was all but oblivious to the words of those he left behind. He was stuck in the same old rut as when he started. Tiredly roaming the streets of Caeruleus City.

He had never dared drag anyone with him on his night walks. To him, it was only a fate he deserved to suffer. But this time, he wasn’t alone.

He held his left arm away from his body, holding the hand of his imaginary friend for the night: his former dancing partner.

She was no longer an apparition. He was no longer a phantom of the night. Now, she was just imaginary, and he was just a man.

“You know, I probably won’t see you again,” Atticus said to the cold empty air. “But hey, we didn’t put together a half bad show. I sure hope that that soup can did some good.”

His eyes began to droop, begging to remain closed. It took more and more effort to hold them up with every blink, to the point he felt there were a few barbells stuffed into his eyelids. He took that as a sign.

“Looks like I should start heading back. Maybe I won’t have any nightmares to keep me up by the time I get to bed...finally get that damn dreamless night.”

He took a right down a road he knew would bring him back to where he had started.

“I wonder who that Nocturne Magician was that Traj was talking about. Must be a pretty nice guy to do all those things in



the Plebian District,” Atticus mused to himself and his imaginary friend. “Funny that there’s someone else doing magic down there.”

He sighed, and struggled to push himself along a steep hill. “Probably not an amateur like me.”

He walked in silence from then on, his imaginary friend helping him trudge on.

As for Crassus and Traj, they had no need for such childish comforts. They had the human defiance against all of history and power in their hearts, and that was all they were in need of.

They walked across the bridge, eyes trained on their first targets. The two Praetorian Guards on their 34th game of tic-tac-toe.

One of them glanced up as they approached. “Hold on fellas, I’m gonna need to see some identification-” he paused, and squinted at Traj. “Wait a second are you-?”

The two were almost upon them now.

Traj smiled and reached into his coat pocket. “Yes, sir. I am indeed.”

Before the guard could say another word, Traj lunged forward and grabbed his face with one hand. There was a single moment of surprise across the guards face just as his throat was slit by the Anarchist’s knife.

The other guard fared no better with Crassus. Both still warm bodies were stripped of their unused pistols and then tossed into the river.

“We have twelve minutes till the next rotation,” says Crassus.

“Then we better get going. We still have a package to deliver,” replied Traj.

So they pressed on into the Senatorial district walking as fast as they could without arousing suspicion. Soon they rounded





the corner and arrived at their destination, the 1st precinct Praetorian Guard Station.

Traj hid in the shadows while Crassus proceeded, his face was too well known to their enemy.

“Good evening, Guards!” said Crassus brightly as he approached the two Praetorians at the entrance to the Guard Station. “I have a package for Sergeant Hector for immediate delivery from the Valetudinarium.”

“Hah! It’s probably his ass cream,” snickered one of the guards as he accepted the delivery.

Crassus smiled. “Most likely.”

A guard took it inside.

“Five.”

“Huh?”

“Four.”

“Why are-“

“Three.”

“Now wait!” the guard started to fumble for his firearm. Then he froze.

“Two.” Crassus pointed his stolen gun right between the guard’s eyes.

He gulped.

A fireball blew out the Station’s barred windows in an ear shattering explosion. So loud, that it made the sound of the pistol going off indiscernible.

The guard dropped to the floor as the flames started to climb the walls.

Traj ran up to his comrade’s side and scooped up the dead guard’s pistol, adding it to their growing collection. He was grinning.

“Hah! I can’t believe that actually worked! Come on, Felicia said she’d be waiting for us by the sewer entrance.”



Crassus put up his arm, stopping him from leaving. He motioned his head towards something across the street. Traj turned around.

There stood Atticus, holding a revolver by his side, but not aiming it at anyone or anything. He locked eyes with Traj.

They staid like that for a moment, as whatever made them legends and phantoms of the moment became old and thin in the ether, until they were just three strange men standing at the scene of terror.

Atticus was the first to blink and divert his gaze. He walked away, as if he hadn't seen a thing. He didn't turn back as they fled, or when he heard the sirens coming.

Eventually the city was gone, and he was left in the long, bare hall of the third floor boy's dormitory in the Caerulean State Academy.

He walked down it, trying and failing to compose himself better than on the streets, and stopped in front of an oak door near the end of the hall. He lifted his key to the knob, and fumbled with the lock, but paused before he opened the door.

"What a night, huh. I'm sorry you had to see all that. Well, I'm sorry I had to see all that. But it can't be helped I suppose," he said to his imaginary friend.

"I guess I should bid you goodbye. And goodnight, for what it's worth. I wish I could have gotten to know you better. Maybe I still will, I don't know. Then, maybe I'll learn your name. Something that begins with C for Caeruleus...or Corinthian Column, or Callidus or collision course..."

His friend vanished from his mind as he opened the door and walked into the room.

He took a look around, his eyes having adjusted to the dark hours ago. He tossed off his filthy trench coat and pulled off his shoulder harness as well, discarding the revolver he had been hiding into one of the desk drawers next to him.



He turned to the boy fast asleep in the twin bed opposite his, having half a mind to reach over and run his hand through the boy's short hair. But he didn't want to wake him.

Instead he collapsed onto his own bed, still in his clothes.

His body had finally surrendered, for while the city could hold off the darkness perpetually with its street lights and glows from behind windows, he could not, and the slumber stole him.



## Chapter Two

### The Students

To Quintus Aurelius, sunlight was like a pleasant jolt of electricity. Once the light slipping through the shades turned from sepia to white, he was off like an arrow from a bow. That gave him unique advantages as a student at the Caerulean state academy, at least in the early fall and late spring.

There was still an alarm clock in his dorm, but that was mostly for the benefit of his roommate: Atticus Permisc. As hard as it was for him to go to bed it was just as hard for him to get up, usually because by the time the alarm went off, he had only been asleep for about three hours.

For today, just like almost every other day, Quintus Aurelius had let the alarm clock ring as he got dressed. And his assessment of the situation grew grimmer with every obnoxious wake up call.

After he had let it go to the forty fourth ring, he conceded that he would have to resort to manual means. He leaned over Atticus, who was laying face first on his twin bed, over the covers, still wearing his clothes from the night before, and gently shook his shoulder.

It took a couple seconds before he started to blinkingly open his eyes.

“Hey. We gotta get going. We’re going to be late again.”

Atticus looked confused for a moment. But then he focused on Quintus, and began forcing small smile and a wide awake look onto his face.



That didn't do much to hide the massive bags under his eyes.

"Dear Veritas, what were you doing last night?"

Atticus' smile faded away.

"I was out...walking..."

"That makes it, what? Three times this week?"

Quintus frowned when he nodded weakly.

"You can't keep doing this to yourself."

"I just...had a bad dream the night before. I figured that if I was out walking long enough, I wouldn't have dreams by the time I actually got to sleep."

"Well. Did you?"

"No. I don't think so."

"Mission accomplished then. I hope you realize it was a pyrrhic victory."

"Ah, but those are my favorite kind."

Quintus shook his head. "You'd better get ready or else we'll miss breakfast."

"They better have something decent today," said Atticus as he pushed himself into a sitting position.

"I have a good feeling about it," replied Quintus.



"Crickets!" Atticus muttered darkly under his breath. He eyed the bowl of fried insects on his tray with distrust.

Quintus followed him out of the serving line. "Aside from being both crunchy and delicious, they are a good source of protein."

"I hate crickets," he mumbled, just loud enough for Quintus to hear.

Quintus popped one into his mouth as he walked. Atticus cringed when he heard the chitin crunch.

They sat down at an empty table.



“Do you think you’re ready?” asked Quintus, chewing on another cricket.

“For what?”

“The assessment. Just three days away.”

Atticus swallowed. “I think so...I mean, I don’t know. I don’t think I’m going to make it...”

“You shouldn’t think like that.”

“I’m up against real people, Quintus. Adults with active duty military careers. Smarter, more eloquent people. It’s just tradition they take two people from the academy each year, anyway. No one from here has gotten the position in five terms. That’s at least over a hundred years.”

Quintus shook his head. “I’ve seen you be eloquent, like...like in the Baccus lawsuit. You kicked ass in that.”

“That was just a diploma requirement,” said Atticus dismissively. He picked up and nibbled the edge of a bread roll.

“And that makes it any less impressive?” asked Quintus. He popped another cricket into his open mouth and then waved his hands, trying to visualize the scene. “It was the case of the weekend, neigh, millennium. The prosecution was a veteran lawyer, a former Tribune of the Interior, if I am not mistaken. The defense was staffed with one senior student of the Caerulean State Academy. And the stands were filled to the boiling point of spectators, watching with curious and sweaty eyes.”

“I don’t think eyes can be sweaty.”

“The defendant was an alleged member of the Burning Fuses, the most infamous Anarchist group in the city! The crime: arson of the highest malice against the Praetorian Guard, attempting to burn down the armory by the Sominculus River. If found guilty the penalty would be death. The evidence was underwhelming, but the prosecution argued passionately! ‘These desperate attempts to disrupt the rule of government and cause chaos cannot go unpunished!’ he declared.” Quintus pointed his



finger accusingly at an imaginary defendant. “But then, just when the magistrate looked convinced, our hero came out!”

“I’m not any hero from an epic, Quintus,” Atticus shook his head lightly. “I was just a lawyer.”

Quintus continued to tell the story, but Atticus remembered it slightly differently. He was brought back to that musky basilica filled with a summer heat.

His eyes were closed back then, as he listened to his client.

“But I did do it, Mr. Permisc! I swear I wasn’t under orders from the Burning Fases, but I was still the one who threw the match,” he had said.

Atticus sighed. His mind busy with a million different things.

It had been earlier that day when the letter came in for Quintus, marked with the Senatorial seal. It was his nomination for the Tribune of the Plebs, and it sent Quintus jumping and grinning with joy.

A tribune was one of the most honorable positions in the Republic, if there was any honor to be had within it. Subordinates only to the elected Consul, they were chosen to command the vast bureaucratic departments of the government.

If Quintus was chosen he would be among the elite in the capital, charged with supervising the Department of Revenue, and the People’s Department. Of course, Atticus didn’t think Quintus would be chosen, for the same reason he wouldn’t be chosen: nominating students from the state academy was just tradition, and nothing more.

However, the nomination was still a great honor, and it forced a reality onto Atticus: if he ever wanted to work with Quintus and at his caliber, he would need to be exceptional.

“Are you listening to me!?” exclaimed the client.

At once Atticus was upon him, he jumped on the desk, eye to eye with the Anarchist, grinning.



“We’re gonna win the case.”

“What?”

“You are going to plead your innocence. I will defend you. We will win the case!”

“B-but they have eyewitnesses,” he said.

“Yeah? Well I’ve got a loud ass mouth and I know how to use it. I’m a law student at the Caeruleus State Academy, and I’ve lived, eaten and breathed rhetoric twenty four hours a day seven days a week since I was fourteen. I will win this case.” The Anarchist stared at him, unsure.

“The alternative is death,” added Atticus. “For you, that is.”

“Oh...” he said quietly

An elixir of energy and determination ran through his soul that day, and even as the evidence was presented against him, and the spectators murmured, a serene confidence shone in his eyes. He had never felt it before, and he had never felt it since.

“**Anarchy!**” exclaimed the prosecutor, slamming his palm down on the wooden railing between his desk and the magistrate’s seat. He was a lean man, with bushy eyebrows, wryly combed back hair, and wore a toga just like Atticus and the magistrate. “The bacterial disease which infects our great city’s limbs and appendages, discoloring them and filling them with pus.”

The prosecutor strode across his stone platform, staring intensely at the spectators, his gaze like a steel tipped spear, aimed at one man, then another, then a woman, and finally, the magistrate.

“**Fire!**” his word rang out in the basilica. “The instrument for which vagrants, and rats of men hold up in bitterness against us.”

Atticus watched him closely, and listened attentively, a small smile on his lips.





“**Mister Baccus!**” he whirled around and pointed to the defendant. “The hand of the Anarchists, wielding their fire and their violence!”

He paused, and waited for the echoes to dissipate.

“He is the man eyewitnesses have identified, he is the man who had clothes with the scent of gasoline, he is the man before you today, and he...is an Anarchist!” proclaimed the prosecution boisterously. “His fire ravaged the Praetorian Guard Armory! Costing the taxpayers of *Caeruleus* half a million Sesterces! Endangering countless lives! These desperate attempts to disrupt the rule of government and cause chaos cannot go unpunished!”

The prosecutor paused, taking two deep breaths before he raised his pointer finger up above the magistrate, to the depiction carved in stone. There were two bundles of sticks, bound together with a dull axe blade protruding from them.

They were the Fasces: the symbols of all magistrate power.

“The *Burning Fasces!* That is what they call themselves. An affront to all peace and civility in our time,” the prosecutor turned around, his gaze lowered to Atticus. “Now, Mr. Permisc may claim that the defendant is not among these vagrants. He may also claim that the evidence of both the eyewitnesses and the Praetorian Guards is naught but a bizarre coincidence. But Veritas knows no coincidences! When it is all boiled down, it is not the eyewitnesses or the Praetorian Guards which incriminate Mister Baccus. It is the reality of his actions!”

The prosecutor’s eyes met Atticus’ sending him a dark glare. Atticus smiled in return.

“The prosecution rests,” said the old lawyer; he walked off the stage.

Atticus waited until his opponent was seated in his chair, then, slowly, he stood up.

He walked, placing one foot carefully in front of the other until he was at the center of it all.



To his right and left were the spectators, behind him was his client, and directly in front was an elderly man with three chins: the magistrate. The person he had to convince.

He glanced to Quintus sitting among the spectators, his shoulders squared and eyes attentive. Beside him was a girl nearly the same age, with light freckles around her cheeks and the bridge of her nose. She wore her brown hair down, and clasped her hands in her lap as she watched the law case.

Her name was Serena Aurelius. Quintus' sister.

She smiled as he looked her way, and Quintus nodded slightly, trying to send his silent support.

Atticus cleared his throat, turning away from them.

"Indeed...Veritas knows no coincidences. Veritas can only know truth," said Atticus, beginning softly. "Any good philosopher can tell you that. However, we have neither Veritas nor an expert of her in our presence, despite the prosecution's insinuations. Instead, we have two facts given to us by regular old humans: the eyewitnesses and the Praetorian Guards. The smell of Mr. Baccus' clothes, and Mr. Baccus' general location in Caeruleus City on the night of the fire."

"Actually, I should apologize...there are three facts. Mr. Albertus, the prosecution, has informed us that an Anarchistic group with the rather incendiary name Burning Fases exists in the same city as Mr. Baccus." Atticus turned around to face the prosecutor.

"I would like to remind the spectators and magistrate..." said Atticus, wagging his finger as he glanced to each of the mentioned parties, "...that there has not been a single piece of material evidence connecting Mister Baccus to the Burning Fases. This group, infamous for its bond in comradeship, has made no attempt to free Mr. Baccus, or any sign to claim him as one of their own.



“As a mechanic, Mister Baccus is a man who must frequently work with gasoline. A fact of his life the Prosecution and the Praetorian Guard have used against him. Mr. Baccus is not an Anarchist, nor an arsonist! With a crime as heinous as arson, the Praetorian Guards were quick to accuse the first suspect they found, no matter the lack of evidence. And who do they find to blame but poor Mr. Baccus, simple, passing by Mr. Baccus. Mr. Baccus who is every single Caerulean who has ever dared to walk the streets of their own city!” Atticus brought his fist down forcefully on the wooden railing.

Atticus blinked, bringing himself back to the breakfast table; the memory passed.

He smiled lightly. That not-guilty verdict still made a tiny flicker of pride glow in his chest whenever he thought about it.

“Well, it doesn’t matter if you were just a lawyer back then. You made for a damn good one. And that was enough for the Senate to recognize you,” said Quintus. He popped a few more crickets into his mouth.

Suddenly, Quintus swallowed and smirked. “It’d be funny if we did get the jobs, though.”

Atticus chuckled and nodded in agreement. “It’d be hilarious. Can you imagine us? On the Senate Floor? Telling them what’s what!”

“Dear Virtus, we’d be a powerhouse of a political duo.” Quintus cleared his throat. “Oh, Censor Permisc! What do you think we should ask the Senate to legalize tomorrow?”

“I don’t know, Tribune Aurelius, perhaps the usual? Mandatory petting zoos? Subsidized toenail clipping?”

“Make hedgehogs the official mammal of Wednesdays?!”

They burst into a fit of laughter, loud enough to turn some heads at the other tables.

“Better eat quickly,” said Quintus after Atticus calmed down. “We’ll have to be at Philosophy soon.”



“Yeah, good idea.”

They didn’t have long before time ran out.

When the first, deep tolls of the bell rang out across the Campus, Atticus stood up.

“I’ll take the trays up,” he said, motioning loosely to the metal platform in the corner designated for used trays.

“I can—” began Quintus, but he was stopped when Atticus picked up his tray anyway.

“I got it,” he said. He gave Quintus a brief smile before turning on his heels towards the corner of the cafeteria.

As he walked, he felt a resurgence of his headache.

He sighed as he put the tray on the metal platform. Nearly everybody was filing out of the cafeteria already, each person prepared to various degrees for another day of the State Academy’s education.

“Mmm,” Atticus groaned, his tongue pressing against a bit of rogue cricket stuck between his teeth.

He paused mid-step and tried to wiggle the piece loose. It tasted rancid on his tongue, but he eventually pushed the thing free.

He spat it out as subtly as possible.

Unfortunately, the projectile’s trajectory took an unexpected turn, landing on the neck of the blue haired boy in front of him.

Atticus blinked, taking a moment to confirm the vivid blueness of bluety that was spewing from his peer’s head.

He swallowed, realizing just who this unnatural hue belonged to: Antony Purpura.

Slowly, the boy’s hand reached back, and lightly wiped off the wet debris. He brought it in front of his face, examining it.

Atticus paled.



Antony turned around at an agonizingly slothful rate, each tiny pace serving to further panic Atticus' mind. Finally, Antony faced him, eyes narrowed.

Atticus took a timid step back.

"Did you just spit on me?"

"Um..." Atticus glanced nervously to the side.

"Did. You. Just. Spit. On me?"

Antony glared darkly at Atticus as he stepped forward and grabbed his collar with two hands.

"Sorry! I didn't mean to—"

Antony lifted him up by the hem of his collar. "You...I know you, don't I?"

"Oh, no. I've just got...that kind of face."

Antony snorted. "You've got the same kind of face as a mauled raccoon, but that's not what I'm talking about. What's your name?"

"Um..." Atticus felt a thin line of sweat form along his skin.

"What? Don't you know your own name?!"

"A-Atticus, Atticus Permisc."

"Yeah, I do know you. You're the other one nominated for the Censorship. You're my competition." He looked Atticus up and down, his nose scrunching up in disgust as he did. "I didn't know the Senate's standards had fallen this low. Pitiful."

Atticus had his voice clogged in his throat as he looked down at Antony. The boy's blue hair fell in bangs over his forehead; his eyebrows were drawn tightly and condescendingly together. He must have been a few inches shorter than Atticus, which made the feat of nearly lifting him off his feet even more impressive. He wore a purple striped dress shirt which he hadn't bothered to tuck into his pants.

Atticus didn't personally know Antony, but he knew his reputation: more arrogant than the last king of Caeruleus, and scarier than a lion. That is, if a lion could kill its prey with a glare



made of one part mania, two parts death, three parts disapproval and nine parts hatred.

“Now, I’m just wondering exactly what you thought you’re doing? Spitting on people is rude, you know. Didn’t your filthy plebiscite mother teach you anything!” said Antony.

Atticus grimaced with his chin pressed against his neck. “T-that’s a tad offensive...”

“I hope you realize, with the Senate willing to break tradition, I will be beating you into the ground in the fight for the Censorship.”

“Wait,” Atticus blinked, “willing to break tradition?”

“Hey!” exclaimed someone behind Antony. “Put him down!”

“Oh, shut up, this has nothing to do with you,” replied Antony, not bothering to look back.

Quintus, the caller, moved quickly and put his hands in-between the two, forcing them apart.

“What do you think you’re doing, Aurelius?” asked Antony, fists clenching in frustration at the intervention.

“I suggest you go to your next class, Antony. I think you’re a bit late,” said Quintus calmly, standing in front of Atticus.

Antony sneered, but glanced to the clock. He frowned.

“Fine. But I advise you teach your friend some manners.” He turned around and walked away with an icy briskness, hands stuffed in his pockets.

When Antony was out of earshot, Quintus turned to Atticus. “Are you alright? I’ve heard that Antony can get a bit hot headed around, you know, people.”

“Yeah, I’m okay,” replied Atticus. He straightened his collar and let out a relieved breath. “I think we’re running late too,” he said.

“Magister Tonas is probably going to make us do that thing again,” said Quintus, making for the exit with Atticus in his wake.



“I’ve already got my argument planned out,” replied Atticus as he and Quintus grabbed their bags from their table as they passed.

Quintus smiled. “Me too. Let’s see how far we can get his bar to go this time.”

Magister Tonas Caesius taught the upper level philosophy classes at the Academy. He was old. How old? None of the students knew. Guesses ranged from him being an ungracefully aged sixty-six year old to one of the ancient gods worshiped by the Cult of V.

His eyes were cloudy with age and cataracts, and his hair had long ago gone thin and begun to bald. He was also missing his pinky and ring fingers on his left hand. The most popular theory was that he traded them to the ghosts and spirits of the school in exchange for job security.

Nobody ever dared ask for the truth.

When Atticus and Quintus walked into the philosophy classroom, Tonas was handing back graded essays.

Antony was already seated in the far corner.

Tonas was passing back an essay with a perfect score to Antony when he noticed Atticus and Quintus

“Late!” he shouted, storming towards them. “Late again, Mr. Permisc and Mr. Aurelius! I can count at least a dozen schools of thought that would list punctuality as a virtue and you two are an affront to them all! I hope you have something to say in defense! I should remind you that you have already used Stoicism, Epicureanism, Humanism, Nihilism, Moral Relativism, Existentialism, Infinitism, Rationalism, Realism, Determinism, Indeterminism, Egalitarianism, Pragmatism, and Utilitarianism as foundations for your arguments, meaning that you have...what is it? About nine philosophical concepts left from the list on the syllabus. Mr. Permisc! You’re up first.”



Magister Tonas had a very unique tardy policy: any student late to his class had to use a different school of thought to argue as to why arriving late could be an ethical decision.

“Skepticism!” said Atticus, declaring his philosophy of choice. “At the thought that my senses are working properly, so much so that I have actually arrived on time without knowing it.”

“Stupid, but I’ll accept it. Mr. Aurelius?”

“Whimsicalism. Because the dandelions told me to.”

Tonas narrowed his eyes. “Damn whimsicalists,” he muttered.

Begrudgingly, Tonas handed Quintus and Atticus their graded essays. “Alright, to your seats.”

Atticus sent his teacher a grateful smile before he and Quintus found a place to sit near the front, far away from Antony.

He looked to his essay: sixty out of seventy points. It was a decent grade, only made possible because Quintus had helped him pace himself. It was awhile ago, but he could remember being out walking every night for a week before writing that essay. The day it was due he collapsed from exhaustion in front of his door.

He was particularly proud of that essay.

“Now!” Tonas addressed the class. “Mister Permisc’s tardiness has brought an interesting topic to mind.”

The teacher walked to the front of the room. It was a treacherous journey, past all the stacks of disorganized tomes and textbooks he supposedly needed to educate, but were really only there because he was too lazy to do anything about them. He jumped over a discarded thesis on jurisprudence and made it to the dusty chalkboard.

He picked up a stubby piece of chalk and scrawled *THE CENSOR OF CAERULEUS* on the board.

“If you don’t know already, there are two candidates for the Censorship in my class today. A fact probably attributed to my skillful and vigorous educational prowess.”





There were some snickers from the back row.

“Atticus Permisc, and Antony Purpura have been given the honor. And this government position pertains most pertinently to philosophy, more so than the Senators, Tribunes or Consuls. The Censor was given the power to designate the official moral center of Caeruleus. It was his state-sanctioned right to say not just what was legal and illegal, but what was moral and immoral. Some historians refer to the position as the official philosopher of Caeruleus,” Tonas lectured. He paused to circle the word Censor, and write the word philosopher next to it with a question mark.

“The position was made by King Superbus a few years before the monarchy fell, if for no other purpose than to exemplify his arrogance. After the revolution and the creation of the republic many old institutions similar to the Censorship were destroyed, but this one stayed. Surviving to the point where its nominees are sitting right in front of me. So I wonder...”

Tonas wiggled his way back through the mini-maze of books and put his hands down on Atticus’ desk, leaning forward.

“...what would your morals be, Mr. Permisc?”

Atticus angled himself in his chair away from Magister Tonas. “Um...”

He had never really thought about what he’d actually do as the Censor before...the question took him by surprise.

He opened his mouth to answer.

“Of course it doesn’t matter what those morals would be,” said Tonas, spinning back around, towards the board, “because all of the philosophical power given to the Censor was revoked after the revolution. Being one of the last vestiges of the tyrannical reign, the Censorship was stripped of its old power and became something of a secretary for the Senate whose primary job was to draft laws requested by the Tribunes. Laws that would be sent to the Senate to be debated upon and subsequently butchered into an unidentifiable blob of words and wet paper.”



He messily erased the chalkboard. He turned around, his eyes making for someone in the back row. It was subtle, but Atticus saw him send Antony an uneasy gaze.

“As a reminder, your essay on how the mythological story of Veritas and Mentiri affected classical philosophy is due at the beginning of next class,” declared Tonas.

Muffled groans came from across the class. Atticus and Quintus exchanged a confused glance.

Slowly, Quintus raised his hand. “Um, Magister, I don’t believe we’ve started that unit.”

Tonas paused, and rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “Oh yeah...say, how much time do we have left?”

Quintus glanced at the quartz clock on the wall. “About an hour.”

Tonas grinned grimly. “Well then. We’ve certainly got our work cut out for us.”

The groaning intensified.

Magister Tonas cracked his knuckles before he started writing frantically on the board.

Quintus sighed and glanced to Atticus. He had his face in his hands, massaging the area around his eyes. He just looked so tired, and the idea of having to write another essay in a single night only served to defeat him more. Maybe there was something he could do to make him feel a bit better...

“Hey, Atticus,” he said, soft enough that Tonas wouldn’t hear. “Me and Serena were talking about going to see something in the E/M District. Once we’re done with the essay did you want to come with us?”

Instantly, Atticus brightened up. He smiled lightly and lifted his head out of hands. “Yeah, I’d love to.”

“Veritas damn it!” exclaimed Tonas suddenly, having broken his stubby piece of chalk in the middle of writing Veritas.



## Chapter Three

### A Shortcut

The white room couldn't have been more sterile if it had been made out solidified bleach. Each of the four plain walls were immaculately empty, the floor was composed of cold black and white tiles, and the sink was scrubbed with so much antiseptic that its tap water could decontaminate a wound.

It was a hospital room and the only thing noteworthy about it was compressed into the far right corner: a woman lying on a bed with pale blue covers pulled up to her chin.

She breathed weak, raspy breaths as she held the hem of her blanket with wrinkled, bony hands. Her skin was deathly pale and her eyes were closed, not because she was asleep, but because she was too tired to face the world.

However, as her old ears picked up the sound of footsteps, she moved her eyelids. A hopeful light flashed across her face and she glanced at the old, blue book on her night stand. She hadn't bothered to take many possessions with her when she had come to the hospital: only that little book and a golden V on a necklace.

Her hope quickly disappeared when the young nurse walked into the room, a small cup in her hand, and a fresh pillow under her arm. She wore an ocean blue uniform: pants, a simple tunic, and a Blue Cap with a shield emblem on it. She had her light brown hair in a ponytail, and dash of freckles around the bridge of her nose.

"Oh, it's just you, Serena," the old woman muttered.



Serena ignored her. “Good evening to you too, Mrs. Dolia,” she said. She gave her patient a courteous smile. “Are you feeling well?”

Dolia groaned. “What does it matter how I’m feeling. I’m dying.” She pulled the blanket tighter around herself.

Serena frowned. It seemed as though her patient became bitterer after every visit, no matter what she did. “Please...it isn’t healthy to think that way.”

“Ba! I’d rather get out while the going’s good. This world...I can’t even recognize it anymore. I read the papers before my daughter dragged me up here, and they started talking about Anarchists. Anarchists! Controlling half of the Plebian district. Did you know, when I was your age there was still some honor to be had in the republic? Now all it takes to be a senator is the biggest bribe to the voting masses. It’s horrendous,” complained Dolia, eyeing Serena suspiciously as she approached. “Not to mention the stupid Scientific Society, and their stupid foul tasting drugs. Have you ever tried any of the pills you hand out? It’s like licking the floor of a factory. Haven’t those scientists ever heard of molasses or...or even taste buds for that matter!”

Serena sighed as she offered Dolia a tiny cup with two green pills in it. “That medicine is keeping you alive.”

Dolia turned her cheek to the cup. “No more! I’ll be having none of those stupid pills!”

“Mrs. Dolia, please take the medicine.”

Dolia shook her head. “No.”

“For me?”

The old woman nearly choked on the belch of laughter in her throat. “Nope!”

“Why? If anything, it will only decrease your suffering,” said Serena, sitting down beside Dolia. She just couldn’t understand this woman.



Dolia paused, sending the nurse a curious glance. "I'll be alright, Serena. Just leave this old sack of bones alone."

"But—"

"I've had a good life, deary. Did you know I was once the high priestess of the Cult of V?"

Serena stared mutely at her. She had noticed the necklace a long time ago; it was clear that Dolia had been one of the followers, but she hadn't known Dolia had been the high priestess. The knowledge removed no sorrow from her. She still didn't want to see her patient die this soon.

"Well I was. I strode down those white marble halls of the temple as if I owned them, all wrapped up in those gorgeous ancient gowns. I shook hands with Virtus herself and even flirted with the host of Somnium, the god of dreams. Granted we were both under oaths of chastity at the time. But boy, was he a looker!" She nodded thoughtfully, reminiscing on better times. "There was also this once I got high off of poorly composed incense."

"They sound like interesting people. The gods."

"Oh, they always are! It was the greatest honor to have met and learned from them."

"But...they'll come back after they die. You won't..."

Dolia shrugged. "Maybe they'll remember me. That'd be quite enough, don't you think? But I'd doubt anybody would care if I died."

"I would care," replied Serena.

Dolia raised a wary eyebrow. "Don't...I can't imagine a nurse should care about all her patients. It'll give you too much heartache."

Serena straightened her posture with dignity. "I became a Blue Cap because I wanted to take care of people. I'll be alright."

Dolia grunted.

"What about your daughter?" Serena asked.

"What about her?"



“I’d bet she’d care. Or else she wouldn’t have brought you here.”

Dolia fell silent.

Serena waited, hoping her patient would yield. But she did nothing.

Reluctantly, Serena put the medicine on the nightstand.

“What does she do, your daughter?” asked Serena, folding her hands in her lap.

“Hmm? She’s a researcher at the scientific society. She’s a smart girl...real smart. And busy. She lives in a world of electricity, shiny metal and youth. A clever girl. I think you’d like her.”

“She sounds nice.”

“Oh yes,” Dolia nodded. “She’d read from that book of poetry when she visited. She’s a beautiful magician. Whenever she reads she makes the air sparkle and the light and shadows move to her words. I was hoping she would come today...”

“A magician? Like the ones on the E/M district?”

“No! Not at all like those flashy asses. My daughter is a modest magician. She uses her ability in private and with respect.”

Dolia looked to the old book of poetry on the nightstand with longing. She pursed her lips. “Would you like to read a bit? The poems are very good.”

Serena hesitantly reached for the book. She paused. “Are you sure?”

“Go on ahead, deary. It’s always nicer when someone’s reading aloud.”

She took the book from its place and read the title. “*The Blue of Day*, a compendium of poems composed by Alicia Iathina.”

The binding was nearly falling apart so Serena opened it carefully to the table of contents. “What poem do you want me to read?” she asked, running her finger gently down the page. The musty and wonderful scent of aged book drifted to her nose.



“Read them out to me,” replied Dolia.

“*The City of the Sky*,” suggested Serena, reading the first poem title.

“Too happy,” said Dolia, quick to dismiss it.

“*The Artist’s Dream?*”

Dolia shook her head. “Too creepy.”

“*Earthly Children, The Firebird’s Flight* or maybe *The Sky’s Embrace?*”

“Nah, too mythy.”

“*The Caerulean Traveler. Dedilee’s tale. The Lullaby of the War of the Heavens.*”

“No, no, no,” Dolia rejected them. “I’ve read those too often. There must still be a few left.”

“Um...how about *On the Bald Man’s Crown?*”

“Ahhh,” Dolia nodded approvingly. “Yes. That one.”

Serena flipped to the poem’s page. Beside the columns of written stanzas was the picture of a man standing on a grassy knoll, the top of his head completely devoid of hair. He had a sorrowful gaze in his eyes, staring towards the ground. She looked to the first line on the yellowing page.

*“Every child in Iuvenes had heard of the Bald Man,  
They talked about him as if he didn’t have another name.  
‘Did you hear where the Bald Man was wandering?’  
They’d ask each other. The answer was never the same twice  
He was a local legend. But I never believed.  
Imagine my surprise when I stumbled upon his baldness.  
The children played and laughed as he stood there, smiling  
He was a gentle giant of a man, four times as tall as I!  
And his head was just as bare, bald and shiny as they said  
‘Hello up there, Bald Man. How goes the day?’ I called.  
‘It flows past most pleasantly, tiny one,’ he bellowed down  
I asked him if his legend was true, if he truly held up the  
sky on his head!*



*He nodded, the horizon squeaking against his dome.  
'I've held it up for as long as I can remember, little one.'  
I smiled in spite of myself. The sky had rubbed all his hair  
right off!*

*But my smile was wiped away when I recalled the legend's  
end.*

*This man who beamed like the sun is set to die,  
His last breath would come at twilight.  
And the sky would fall.*

*'What is the sky made of, Bald Man?' I asked,  
Taking my seat beside his giant shoes and shin.  
The Bald Man sighed. 'Tears and fears, don't you know?  
The cries and despair be lighter than air,  
They fly up and collect in that blue butterfly net!  
It may pinch and occasionally seep,  
But it is my burden alone to keep.'*

*'And what will become of it?  
When you become unfit to hold it up?'  
I could see the sunlight dim, and his face sour.  
Silly old bald man, the strongest man upon the earth,  
Don't you know that you will die?'*

Serena stared at the final line of the poem having allowed every word to flow off her tongue. Something sad flickered in her chest. She felt that maybe she knew a tall, bald man.

She gently closed the little book of poetry and put it back on the night stand.

"Sorry, Mrs. Dolia, I'm not a magician like your daughter," she said looking over the bed, where no air shimmered, and no miracles occurred. Save for the thin joyous smile on Dolia's face.

"Oh that's quite alright, darling, quite alright," said Dolia.

Serena glanced to the cup on she had left on the nightstand. "Would you like to take your medicine now?" she asked hopefully.

Dolia sighed. "I-





“Please...”

Dolia looked up at Serena thoughtfully.

“Well...I suppose it wouldn’t hurt,” she said, finally yielding and accepting the two pills. “I’m sorry for keeping you here so long, Serena. I’m sure you have young people things to do.”

Serena smiled sheepishly, “I’m meeting my brother and his friend to see one of those flashy-ass magicians in the E/M district in just a bit.”

“Ahhh,” said Dolia.

Serena stood up to leave, but was stopped when Dolia’s bony hand grasped hers. She looked to her patient, wondering what else she needed.

“Thank you,” Dolia said graciously.

They were only two words, and a mere civility at that, but for Serena they sent a wave of pride crashing through her body. Not only for her profession, but for the fact that Mrs. Dolia would likely live to see her daughter for another visit. She had done well.

“You’re welcome,” she replied with a warm smile.

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When Serena walked swiftly from the threshold of the Central Caerulean Valetudinarium, she was still in her ocean blue uniform, pantsuit, and cap, and carrying a teal handbag. It was that uniform that gave the nurses of Caeruleus their street name: Blue Caps. Serena wore it with pride; it was a symbol of her status as a caretaker of the sick and weak, for even though the Valetudinarium was so called because it was a place to say “goodbye” to loved ones, it was also a place of hope.

There was a long, open forum adjacent the Valetudinarium’s road, one bustling with Caeruleans from every walk of life. Serena walked across, dodging the celery and garum venders to make it to the other side. She was going to have to take



a shortcut through the Plebian District if she wanted to make it in time.

The hospital sat on the very corner of the Senatorial, Equestrian and Plebian Districts, as close to the center of Caeruleus City as physically possible. The only districts that weren't in the immediate vicinity were the industrial and E/M district.

Around her were tall columns holding up marble and granite buildings, wide ornate arches, and facades with intricate artworks. But that all disappeared when she took the road into the edge of the Plebian District, leaving the forum.

The path through wasn't a long one, but her colorful uniform made her stick out. She did her best to keep to herself as she navigated through the mass of people going to and fro between concrete buildings.

She only had one more alley to make it to the E/M district, it was a thin, shadowy way, but Serena had taken it several times before and it was only ever menacing at first glance. She adjusted her cap before entering and carefully treading over discarded garbage and a few scurrying rats.

Serena froze when she rounded the corner, halted in mid-step.

"Stupid Praetorians. I can't believe we had to move our meeting place to this dump..." said a young black man with a leather jacket kicking at an apple core begrudgingly.

He stood at the front of a group of about a dozen. They were all young, none older than twenty-some-odd-years, and they were all dressed in a variety of Plebian clothes with one constant accessory: something red, perhaps a scarf or shirt or hat or tattoo in the shape of an **A**. Anarchists.

The apple core rolled and bounced on the alley ground until it stopped at Serena's feet. She swallowed as the gaze of the Anarchists slowly turned to her.



Someone with a wool jacket and a wavy haired ponytail made his way through the small group. Everyone instantly stepped aside to let him pass.

“Who are you?” he asked, looking at Serena with his arms crossed.

“N-no one,” Serena tried to backtrack, but escape wouldn’t come that easily. The man in the leather jacket grabbed her by the shoulder and roughly dragged her into the center of the circle of Anarchists.

“She’s a Blue Cap, Traj,” he said, eying her uniform suspiciously.

Traj lowered his eyebrows. “No Crassus, she’s a damn beige cap,” he replied sarcastically.

“I didn’t see anything, I swear. I was just trying to go to the E/M district,” said Serena, trying to make herself look small.

“I say we kill her,” said Crassus as if they were deciding what they should eat for lunch.

“Well...” began Traj, looking quizzically at her. He paced around her. “I’m not sure. Blue Caps are funny things. Nurses they may be, but still such loyal servants to their masters in the Senatorial District.”

He smiled thinly to himself, and sent shivers down Serena’s spine.

“Do you know that I’ve watched people die? Good people. Innocent people. Plebian people. Now, I wonder where you Blue Caps were when there were Plebian children slowly crawling their way to death with a simple cold, or infected cuts, or factory accidents. We happen to know the people you’ve turned your back on,” he said darkly, starring Serena down. Her eyes were wide with terror.

Crassus sneezed into his hand and wiped it off on Serena’s sleeve.

“We do our best to help everyone...” said Serena timidly.



“Really?” asked Traj skeptically.

“I do...”

“Now, where did you say you were going?” he asked brightly, his tone changing on a dime as he took a step out of her personal space.

“T-the E/M District.”

“Then you better be on your way.” With a wave of his hand the Anarchists moved out of her path.

She glanced unsurely to Crassus, and the others.

“Go on,” Traj urged her.

Hesitantly, she took a few steps forward. Nobody moved. She made a run for it, almost sprinting away from them.

She didn’t make it very far before an Anarchist lifted up their leg, tripping her. She tried to break her fall with her hands, but accomplished nothing more than gaining a pair of scraped palms, and crushing a dandelion sprouting from between the concrete cracks.

A few of them chuckled and snickered.

Serena swallowed.

“Hey, General Trajan, looks like we’ve got another peeper,” said one of the female Anarchists, pushing someone forcefully in front of Serena.

Slowly, Serena lifted her gaze. The first thing she noticed was the dirty, muddy black boots. And then the light brown fabric of a trench coat that fell all the way to the man’s knees. She pushed herself up farther, and her eyes briefly flashed with hope. It was Atticus.

But then that hope faded when she saw the look of abject fear on his face.

Carefully, Atticus helped Serena back to her feet.

“Um...” he began, glancing nervously to the faces of the Anarchists assembled before him.

“Um?” repeated Crassus suspiciously.



“We...we were just planning on meeting in the E/M District. We don’t really care what you’re doing here, honestly,” said Atticus, trying to defuse the situation.

“Yeah, well you’re probably going to care less when you’re dead,” replied Crassus crassly. He swiftly withdrew a long kitchen knife from a hidden sheath beneath his shirt.

Serena and Atticus both flinched back as Crassus wielded it.

They didn’t have to flinch for very long before Crassus was promptly punched in the gut, his knife sent clamoring to the ground from the impact.

“Don’t be an asshole, Crassus,” he said. “We’re not going to kill them.”

“Ahhh, man. That hurt,” complained Crassus as he rubbed his side.

Traj rolled his eyes with annoyance. “Then try to imagine how a knife would have felt.”

He pointed to Atticus, and addressed the other Anarchists. “I once saw this man do a good deed. While I may not infallible in my judge of character, we should at least try to return one good deed with another. Although, I gotta say...” he turned to Atticus, giving him a quizzical look, “What are you doing meeting with a Blue Cap?”

“Uh...” Serena and Atticus exchanged a glance. “She’s my...girlfriend,” said Atticus, doing his best to sound convincing.

Traj paused, and raised an eyebrow. He looked at Atticus. Then at Serena. Then back at Atticus. He was skeptical. But if Atticus wanted to stick up for this Blue Cap, he wasn’t going to stop him.

“Alright...on your way then. As if this never even happened,” said Traj, shooing with his hands. “You know how to do that.”

Once again, Serena hesitated, unsure if this was trickery or not. Atticus looked curiously into Traj’s eyes. There was some



reason for releasing them that Traj was hiding. It frightened him, but not enough to refuse his invitation. He took hold of her arm and pulled her away from the group.

Anxiously, they made for the end of the alley. Their backs were unnaturally straight as they wormed their way through the ranks of Anarchists who looked down on them with suspicion and distaste.

Before they could leave, they heard one last call from Traj. “I’ll be seeing you around, Atticus.”



## Chapter Four

### An Incendiary Performance

Atticus and Serena breathed a sigh of relief when they were out of gloomy alley.

They had made it to the main road where a mass of people roamed every which way, their voices and footsteps making a dull roar in the background.

“That was...an experience,” said Serena, dusting off her uniform.

“Uh-huh,” agreed Atticus. He stared up at the sky, waiting for his panic to alleviate.

“I can’t believe you got there when you did. How did you even find me?”

“I was just walking by and I thought I heard your voice. I’m glad Traj was there, or else we’d both be dead.”

“Yeah...what was that guy talking about? You’ve met him before?”

“Once.”

Serena leaned against the building behind her, and took off her shoes. “We should tell the Praetorian Guard, those guys are probably the ones who blew up that station in the Senatorial District.”

“I don’t know about that,” lied Atticus. “But it wouldn’t do much good either way. The Anarchists will be long gone by the time they get here, and it’d probably make us late for the show.” Dealing with Praetorians was only marginally more enjoyable than dealing with Anarchists.



“Besides uh...what are you doing?” he asked curiously as Serena tugged off her woolen socks and replaced them with a new, thinner pair from her handbag.

“The socks they make us wear with the uniform are really annoying. They’re thick and hot, and make my feet sweaty. It’s really the only thing I can’t stand about the standard attire, so I usually change right after I get off my shift. But I was running late, so I thought I’d wait until I got here. Also, life threatening experiences aren’t particularly helpful when it comes to sweat,” she explained as she stuffed her old pair into her bag and put her shoes back on.

“Oh,” said Atticus simply, suddenly very conscious about his toes.

“It’s a shame we can’t get together like we used to,” he said after a moment.

“You mean when Quintus would bring you home like a lost puppy after grade school?” asked Serena, smiling.

Atticus blushed, and tried to look away to hide it. “Yeah, that’s when...” he mumbled quietly. “Can I ask you-”

“Ah, finally found you two!” exclaimed Quintus, jogging up to them with a paper bag tucked under his arm; holding up their tickets.

Serena’s face brightened as soon as she saw her brother. In an instance she had him wrapped up in the tightest hug she could manage. “Quintus!”

He smiled after getting over the initial squeeze, and returned the embrace warmly. “Salvé, Serena. Did you get here alright?”

“I made it here in one piece,” she said as they released each other.

“What’s in the bag?” asked Atticus curiously. He realized he would have to wait till later to ask Serena his question.





“You won’t believe what they were vending over there. Brand new, automatic flash cameras! The bulbs last five uses; at seven Sesterces I’d say it was a bargain,” Quintus said as he proudly took out the metal contraption. The craftsmanship looked shoddy, and it was most certainly meant for the hands of a common tourist instead of a professional, but it was a camera.

“Now smile!” said Quintus, turning around. He put one arm around Serena and the other around Atticus, while trying to hold the camera as far off as he could. There was a click and then a blinding light.

“Ah!” exclaimed Serena and Atticus in unison, shutting their eyes tight.

“Oh, wait. I think I blinked,” said Quintus, attempting to reset the camera from his position.

“How could you blink? You’re the one taking the picture!” Atticus muttered incredulously.

“You know what? How about we all blink for this next one?” suggested Serena as she experimentally winked her right eye and then her left, checking if she still had full color eyesight.

“Yeah, I think that’s a pretty good idea,” added Atticus, squinting into the distance.

Quintus scoffed. “Fine.”

This time they all carefully closed their eyes before the flash went off.

Atticus smiled as he saw the orange glow behind his eyelids and felt Quintus’ arm around his shoulder. It wasn’t often that he had moments like this, when he could enjoy the company of his friends.

“Remind me to develop those later,” said Quintus, stuffing the camera back into the bag. “The show should be starting soon.” He started towards the grand amphitheater.

The amphitheater wasn’t the tallest building on its respective street, but it was most certainly the widest, taking up



half the block. Its broad, smooth stone walls were painted a gaudy green color, making it stand out like an exotic lizard nestled among dead leaves.

Being in the E/M District, the concrete curbs were lined up and down with vendors selling trinkets, food and brightly colored novelty items. In between the vendors were the street performers, presenting their unique and bizarre talents in hope of being spared a Sesterce.

Above the amphitheater's grand entrance was the Caerulean Flag, hanging from the roof. It was bright blue, and had the silver letters "SPQC" stitched into it. The acronym meant "The Senate and the Caerulean People," when translated from the ancient language.

There weren't many places or businesses that held the flag aloft, for fear of vandalism, Anarchists, or an overall lack of patriotism. However, the Publius family was an ancient aristocratic one, and Marcellus Publius, the current owner, was a particularly boisterous senator.

There was a small line to enter when Serena and Atticus caught up with Quintus. The old man standing in front of them had a cardboard basket of chicken pan-fried in olive oil. The smell of the warm, seasoned meat met Atticus' nose, as well as another scent else...something hard to pinpoint.

He sniffed, searching his mind for the right word. It was just so familiar! A bit musty, a bit dusty, the essence of calcium based chalk, the metal twang of ink, and the smearing of pyrite on paper.

*Academia!*

As the man chewed on a piece of his chicken, he lost his grip on the other, slippery half which plummeted tragically to the ground before being subsequently down-trotted on by the person in line beside him.



“May the dogs of cynicism devour your limbs!” he exclaimed bitterly to the one who had ruined his morsel.

Atticus instantly recognized that voice, but Quintus was the first one to put his surprise into words.

“Magister Tonas?” he asked.

“Eh?” Their philosophy teacher whirled around.

“Oh...students...” he said, less than enthusiastically.

“Um, I take it you’re here to see the play as well, Magister,” said Atticus. He had never run into a teacher outside of the Academy before. It felt awkward.

“More than that, I’m here to watch a train wreck. The fiery, miserable train wreck that will be that magician Hectus’ performance!” explained Tonas, suddenly sounding gleeful.

“I’m sorry, but...I don’t understand,” said Serena. “What’s going to happen?”

“Oh, you’ll see, you’ll see!” said Tonas. “But if your impatience knows as little bounds as my students’ temporal incompetence, then you should know I have a court order to consult for magicians in the E/M district, and advise them on any tricks where they have no idea what they’re doing. Which, mind you, is all of them. And this pretty caudex thinks he’s good enough to set himself on fire. This should be simply golden!”

The three young ones exchanged confused glances.

“I didn’t know you were a magician, Magister,” said Quintus.

“It’s more of a hobby these days. But unfortunately the courts deemed me enough of an expert to waste my time at exponentially idiotic rates,” he replied, adjusting his shirt with his free hand in a dignified manner, seemingly oblivious to the grease stains he was spreading.

Before they could continue the odd conversation, the group of students, teacher, and nurse found it was their turn to show their tickets and enter the amphitheater.



They made their way to their seats in the second to last row as the lights began to dim. Atticus walked behind the others, making sure he sat next to Serena at the end of the row. He still had a question to pose to her.

“So, how goes the grading for the Veritas and Mintiri Essays?” asked Quintus as innocuously as possible as he took his seat to the left of his teacher.

Tonas tried and failed to hold in a guffaw. “Let me tell you a little thing about teaching cranberries, Mr. Aurelius...”

Quintus frowned, finding himself on the receiving end of a mild mannered rant.

Atticus sent his friend a brief look of sympathy before directing his attention to the show.

The actors rushed onstage with fluid, well-rehearsed movements, taking their positions stage left and stage right. Then, from the center archway, entered Hectus the Magician.

He had long blond locks, a shiny silver tunic, and baggy “acting pants” as Atticus thought of them. He also had a copious amount of eyeliner on, excess to the point that it was visible from the back of the theater. To Atticus, he looked a bit ridiculous, but if he was a professional magician he must be good at what he did.

The sound of music and poetry filled the air.

He glanced to his left, where Serena watched the play with a confused look.

She turned to Atticus. “Is this making any sense to you?” she asked, gesturing to the magician currently beating a servant with a mop as his magic exploded into purple flowers around them.

“I heard the writer was a whimsicalist,” replied Atticus. Serena nodded, and was about to turn back to the spectacle when Atticus stopped her. “Hey...there was, um, something I wanted to talk to you about.”



“What?” she asked, instantly curious: there was something unusually serious in Atticus' voice.

“I want you to tell me a story.”

“Is the play not good enough?”

“No, it's just...could you tell me how Quintus became a follower of Sol, and took his vow of chastity?”

She blinked in surprise. “He told you about that?”

“Yeah. I mean, I can see why it suits him. I just wanted to hear the story.”

“How do you know there's a story to it if he hasn't told you it?”

“There's always a story.”

She shifted in her chair, silently conceding the point.

“We were both just kids at the time, and our Dad had us volunteering at a soup kitchen with the Cult of V. The guy in charge of the kitchen was a prophet of Spero. They said he just knew things about people, like their futures. When we were done with our service for the day he pulled Quintus aside, and I heard what he said. He told Quintus that he was one of Sol the Chaste.”

“The sun god who would lovingly send his warmth to all the earthly and the humane, but never once dare to touch them,” said Atticus. He knew the story. He knew all the stories of the gods.

Serena nodded. “The prophet said he would burn just as bright, warm, and loving as Sol. And you should have seen the joy on his face when he heard that. I don't think I've ever seen him so proud.

“Then the prophet asked him if he took after the great god in his way of chastity. But before he answered the prophet's question, Quintus asked why Sol made his vow. And the prophet said it was because if he ever loved someone as a bedfellow then it meant his caring warmth would burn them, and leave the others cold. So Quintus said that he did,” Serena told him. “But I don't



think it was much of a sacrifice from him. He's never been one for physical intimacy. As far as I know," she continued, "he's rejected the advances of at least six girls since he's been at the academy."

Atticus looked forward distantly, not really watching the play.

"Thanks, Serena," he said.

She glanced over to him, and then the other way, towards Quintus. "Hey...Atticus. Have you ever had, like, a girlfriend before?"

"No."

"Boyfriend?"

"No."

She paused, as if she was thinking something over. "Do you have...any friends besides me and Quintus?"

He looked down and didn't reply.

Before they could continue, Tonas interrupted them.

"Oh! Oh! Look!" He pointed excitedly to the stage with his good finger. "He's about to do the stupid Phoenix!"

Both Serena and Atticus looked up, and saw as the magician, caught in the middle of his dramatic monologue, began his magic. With every emphasized syllable came a flicker of light around him until the lights gained weight and depth and ferocity, turning into fire. The flames fanned out, shifting into organic, triangular shapes that flared into bright orange feathers.

Atticus stared on. It was rather beautiful, watching the transformation from man to bird cleansed in fire.

The flames flared brighter.

A scream ripped out from the magical construct. It was not a practiced scream meant to be from a bird or a show, it was a panicked, pained screech from someone who just realized they had set themselves on fire.

Atticus blinked and leaned back in surprise. The magic dissipated, but not the fire burning from the actor's clothes.



Hectus frantically jumped up, and tried to pat the fire down, but only succeeded in losing his balance and falling flat on his back. He was such an odd creature to behold from the nosebleed stands, squirming and flopping about, as if the fire was a second skin he was trying to worm his way out of.

Eventually, his fellow performers were able to suffocate the fire with a blanket. But the damage had already been done.

It was not just Hectus' flesh that had been badly singed but also his reputation and pride, evident by the "Ooos" and various hushed statements among crowd that looked down on the pitiful scene.

Tonas stood up with a giant grin, clapping thunderously in the otherwise deathly silent amphitheater.

"Well done! Well done! Encore! Encore!" he hooted as Hectus was dragged off stage.

The director came on stage to apologize for the show cutting off early, much to the exasperation of the audience.

Tonas ignored him and turned to the young ones in his row. "Say! Do you three want to meet a real magician?!"

Quintus looked back to his two compatriots and shrugged. "Um...sure."

"Excellent! So do I, but it looks like we'll have to settle with Hectus for now," he said, already pushing his way down the aisle.



## Chapter Five

### The Magician's Apprentice

Past the stage that had more tomatoes and lettuce tossed at it than a salad bowl, and past the two tough looking men who only let the three youths past when Tonas said they were with him, was the dressing room of Hectus the magician.

When the four burst through the door they found Hectus there, stripped to his underwear, and covered with dozens of wet rags in front of the mirror of his vanity set.

"Wakey Wakey, sunshine!" exclaimed Tonas, wiping the rag off of his face, exposing a long red splotch across his cheek and dripping eye liner.

"What do you want Tonas? Are you here to rub it in?" asked Hectus, glaring up at the teacher.

"No, this is a social visit. Wonderful weather we're having—*yes* I'm here to rub it in!"

Serena grimaced at the sight of the injured man, and hesitantly moved forward. "Excuse me, Magister Tonas, but I'm a nurse. I should take a look at those burns."

"Sure," said Tonas dismissively, not taking his attention away from the object of his ire. "Why would I want to stop you? I just came here to congratulate Mr. Hectus on his performance. I wonder where he got the inspiration for such a lovely failure of a magic show. Oh wait, I know, from that bowl of garum you have instead of a head. If only there was someone to remind you that in all actuality you suck and don't have anywhere near the skills necessary to do that trick safely! Oh wait, that was me!"





Hectus rolled his eyes and then let out a pained groan when Serena prodded him in the shoulder.

“Did that hurt?” she asked.

“What do you think?” he replied bitterly.

“Now, now, Hectus, no need to be more irritable than your usual self,” said Tonas, pacing around his chair with a thin smile.

Hectus’ face soured. “You know damn well I did what I had to. Less and less people have been going to the amphitheater the last couple of years. Our profits are down twenty nine percent, and so is my pay. Not that many people have money to spend on things like plays. My usual brilliance just wasn’t enough tonight.”

“Your what?!” exclaimed Tonas in disbelief. “Brilliance is hardly the word I’d use to describe a pathetic excuse for a magician that prostitutes his skills for B-rate plays,” he sneered. “You have been given a great gift Hectus, and with it you are capable of so much more than flailing around in front of a half-amused crowd.”

He whirled around, and faced Quintus and Atticus. “Do you two know how magic works?” he asked.

Quintus shook his head.

“N-no,” said Atticus. It was only a half-lie. He knew how to do it: in his experience all that was required was someone gifted with magic, a powerful emotion, and some way to express that emotion to the world. He had often used poetry.

It was about seven years ago when he found out he could do it; the same night he found out his parents were leaving for the north, taking up their positions as Ambassadors to Sylvania while leaving him behind to ‘further his education’.

There was a second hand book of poetry he had been reading then, and it was the first worthy distraction he could get his hands on. But simply reading it hadn’t been enough to drown out the thoughts about what was going to happen, so he began to speak the words out loud. The sound of his own words, and the



meaning behind them, made him feel happy and far away, if for just a little while. It was only when he looked up that he noticed the lights glowing around him.

“Well,” began Tonas, “allow me to explain. Simply put, there is a war. It is the most eternal, violent, and unpredictable war that’s ever been waged. One that has millions of casualties, granted only a handful of victories and involves every single solitary able minded human being. It is the war between what goes on in our heads, and what goes on around us, the war between perception and reality. And usually, on a good day, on a *normal* day reality will win every time.

“Unless reality is fighting someone it cares to listen to. In which case, it can be seduced with the right few words with the proper power and emotion behind them. Magic requires focus, and practice and eloquence. Mr. Hectus here fails to comprehend the true potential of magic, much less how to do it correctly,” said Tonas as if he was giving a lecture in his classroom, putting a rambunctious student back in his place.

“Oh please Tonas, you old bat. I don’t need your speech. And I don’t need your advice, I never did, so just get out.”

Tonas frowned and paced over to the mirror and table set. With an index finger he began to trace lines into the layer of powder makeup that had settled there.

“You honestly think you have nothing left to learn to prevent you from killing yourself?” asked Tonas.

“Hah! What exactly can you do you that makes you so high and mighty?” asked Hectus, pushing Serena away after she prodded him again.

Atticus went to his tip-toes to get a glance at what Tonas had traced into the powder.

It was a single word: *fool*.



Tonas narrowed his eyes, and slapped his hand down on the word. In a flash of yellow light, the table and mirror were engulfed in fire.

Hectus tumbled out of his chair in surprise, Atticus and Quintus took a startled step back.

Atticus watched with awe as Tonas kept his hand flat and unmoving on top of the flaming table, becoming neither burned nor singed. He had never seen a display of magic like that. Tonas hadn't even spoken!

"I once survived in the Northern Woods for three months with nothing but my philosopher's cloak and my magic. Granted, I caught pneumonia half way through and had to be nursed back to health by the locals. But I still know a thing or two about the trade."

The disgraced actor groaned painfully as he plopped himself back into his chair, a few more wet rags falling off his body. "Great. First it's the economy, next some idiot called the Nocturne Magician gets people thinking he's the new thing, and then just one stupid mistake and I've got you on my ass."

Atticus raised his eyebrows at the mention of that particular magician.

"My point is," continued Tonas, closing his second rant of the evening, "you need you to put up, or get out."

"Is that all?" asked Hectus.

Tonas stroked his chin and nodded thoughtfully. "Yes. I think it is."

Quintus cleared his throat as Tonas began to make his exit.

"Good luck on your next performance, Mr. Hectus," he said, trying to offer some condolence before leaving as well.

"I'd advise some silver cream for those burns," said Serena softly to the injured actor, following her brother.



Atticus was the last one left in the dressing room, with the burning vanity and the disgraced actor. Hesitantly, he sent Hectus a forced smile before making like a rabbit after his friends.

“Well, thank you Magister Tonas. That was certainly an edification,” said Quintus.

He sent Atticus an exasperated grimace behind their teacher’s back. Clearly, this was not the evening he had been hoping for.

“Yes, and we’d best be going off now,” added Serena.

Tonas mumbled something as he dug through his pockets, pulling out his last piece of pan fried chicken, and dusting off the pocket lint.

“In that case, I should leave with a word of advice to Mister Permisc. That coat looks disgusting.” He popped his last piece of chicken into his mouth and walked off without another word.

Atticus looked down at his coat. He grunted at the various ink, mud and vomit stains. As if he would ever get rid of the best urban camouflage he could ever ask for.



## Chapter Six

### Family History

**G**ravius Purpura murdered his wife 12 years ago.

His son, Antony, had been there, listening just behind the closed door. There had been an affair beforehand. A scandal involving a rival politician. A reporter had found out. The reporter was murdered too; Gravius' friend, Marcus, had rushed to his doorstep in the middle of the night to tell him of the journalists plans to reveal the scandal and they conspired to stop him.

Discrete connections to other powerful people were called in, and all was hidden.

Gravius had gone through a whole bottle of the most expensive liqueur from his cellar and was tumbling around in his own misery the night it happened, muttering to his son about honor and country and tradition. Grumbling about doing what needed to be done.

Antony stood patiently, listening on the cold amethyst tiles, just as he was taught. He didn't react when his father retrieved one of the antique dueling pistols kept on the mantel. He didn't raise question when he stuffed it with ball and powder.

There was no recoil of horror when his father stormed into the bedroom, when he heard his mother scream out, or when his father stumbled back out his eyes now filled with tearful regret.

"Why are you crying?" was the only thing he had to say.

That was the first time that Antony witnessed the face of someone truly afraid of him.



It turned out, as he grew up, Gravius became increasingly fearful and distrusting of his son. He brought up too many memories of himself. So he punished Antony for it. With beltings and humiliation; letting him dye his hair that stupid blue color when he went through that sort of phase.

Today, Gravius was an old bulldog of a man. Sagging cheeks, thin lips, receding hair and a grim look in his eyes. He was having dinner with Antony, something he arranged on a monthly basis to better keep track of him.

Antony sat at the other end of the grey granite table, stirring his tomato basil soup and staring into its swirling scarlet depths. His father took a sip of his tea as he read through his newspaper.

“You know who I ran into the other day?” asked Antony while Gravius skimmed through the article about a coal mine collapse that trapped several workers.

“Who?”

“My competition for the Censorship. Atticus Permisc.”

“Permisc...must be the boy of our Sylvanian ambassadors. I met them at a state dinner once. Insufferable nutters.”

“So that’s where he gets it from. Anyway, you should have seen the look on his face when I told him that the Senate might break with tradition this year.”

“...excuse me?” Gravius looked up from the paper.

“You know, since the Consuls-”

“Antony! That was privileged information, I had to call in an extremely big favor from some very old friends to learn that and you won’t be cheapening its worth by shouting it to every slack-jawed fool you pass, you understand?!”

“Oh come on, it’s not like he’ll doing anything with that info.”

“Don’t give me that, boy! I gave you that knowledge for your own good. Be grateful for once in your miserable life.”



“I thought you did everything for the good of the country, and the honor of the family.”

Gravius paused, and then sighed. “...perhaps.” He folded up the newspaper and tossed it onto the table carelessly.

“You were rude to him, I presume. This Atticus.”

“Define rude.”

“You will apologize.”

“What, the asshole spit on me, he’s the one who should apologize!”

“Not because of any right or wrong. This is your punishment.”

Antony grated his teeth together.

“Do you know where he is at the moment?”

“Maybe... I think I overheard Quintus say something about a play this afternoon.”

“Excellent!” exclaimed the old man, twisting his cheeks into a grin. “You will go seek him out in the E/M District after we finish here. I’ll be sending someone to follow you, so don’t try to skip out.”

“What?!”

“You heard me.”

Antony muttered something poisonous under his breath.

“A civil Caerulean speaks clearly and with his intent plain,” retorted Gravius, as if he still cared about the proper manners of civil Cearuleans.

Antony didn’t touch his food for the remainder of the meal.

But he didn’t have the stubbornness or the stupidity to ignore the request. So he trudged through the city, pointedly stopping and turning to the servant tailing him every five minutes or so. The streets became more and more annoying as he went on, as he encountered increasingly more rabble.

There must have been some goddess of fate also afoot that day, for while Antony had hoped he could just return upon finding



nothing, his gaze accidentally shifted over the gang of three that included his rival exiting the grubby side entrance of a playhouse.

“Hah! Finally found you all!” he exclaimed with forced enthusiasm.

They all turned to see the blue haired boy walking their way.

“Antony?” said Atticus, caught off guard.

“Oh...it is...so nice to see you...” said Quintus unsurely, raising an eyebrow as their classmate approached them.

“Horrible place, the E/M District,” commented Antony, glancing around. “So many filthy beggars.”

“Do you mean the street performers?” asked Serena.

“Call them what you want.”

“You were looking for us, Antony?” asked Quintus flatly.

“No need to be so curt. We're all friends, er, peers of the same institution here.”

“I have no idea who you are,” said Serena.

“Well that’s...unfortunate.”

“No it’s not,” replied Quintus. It was clear that Antony was squirming around his purpose, and he was growing impatient. “Is there something you wanted to tell us?”

“Ah, yes. You see, I was talking to my father earlier. We were having dinner, and the topic of my encounter with Atticus came up. You know, about how he spit on my neck, and how I simply informed him about the devastating defeat I was going to deal him. And...uh...he ...” Antony began reluctantly, “said that it was...unsportsmanlike to mock the loser before the victory. I overheard that you guys were going to see this play, and he didn’t want me to wait until tomorrow to apologize so...”

It was Atticus' turn to raise an eyebrow. “Well...um...thanks. I guess.”

“Why is your hair dyed blue?” asked Serena, still confused and staring openly.





Antony smiled and slowly ran his hand through his hair, which was only a shade lighter than Serena's cap. "For a show of patriotism."

Serena took a careful step back.

Atticus didn't want to be around Antony more than he had to, but he realized this was his chance to voice his curiosity.

"What did you mean earlier?" he asked, "about the Senate willing to break tradition."

Antony turned his attention back to Atticus. "Depends. What do you know about the current Praetor?"

"Praetor Julius? Not that much. I've been a bit too busy to read the news."

"Well then, allow me to educate you. He's the biggest drunkard and smoker to have ever set foot in the Senate Building. He bought the election with the wealth he inherited from his father's steel business. They say he threw so much money at the election officials and voters he practically bankrupted himself," explained Antony.

"Yeah, I know about the election," said Quintus. "It was one of the biggest disgraces in the history of the Republic. I voted for Agricola."

"Germanicus' whole platform was that he could bridge the divide in the senate between the aristocrats and the industrialists. Guess what he did once he got the office?" asked Antony. He smiled smugly, as if he knew something they didn't. "*Nothing*."

"Nothing?" asked Quintus.

"Nothing in the slightest! The man hates his job, and refuses to do a damn thing besides announce the Senate docket and movements. So what does the Senate and its Consuls do, of course, but milk every single ounce of power they can of him."

"I heard something about that too," said Quintus. "The senate was suspending the Praetor's Veto power, and the Tribunes' collective veto power."



Antony nodded brightly. “Needless to say, the Purpura family has some friends in high places. Trust me when I say the Senate and the Consuls wants to maintain their newfound power. They want Censors and Tribunes that will do precisely what they say, people who are malleable, and eager to please. Like a student from the Caerulean State Academy, for example.”

Atticus blinked, beginning to understand the situation. There was a chance he could be the new Censor.

He wasn’t sure if he should be happy about that.

“Sounds like another good reason to hate politics, if you ask me,” said Serena.

Antony shrugged. “Hey, I’m not going to complain. But, even though the Senate’s opened up their pool of prospective candidates, I wouldn’t get your hopes up Atticus. I don’t think they’d choose such a slacking, blank eyed Equestrian-”

“That’s enough, Antony,” said Quintus, lowering his gaze with a chill.

“Oh shut up, Aurelius. I will say what I mean, and mean what I say,” rebuffed Antony, turning to leave. “See you on the Senate Floor!”

“Good riddance until then,” whispered Quintus to himself.

“What’s his problem?” asked Serena, watching Antony’s blue head as he maneuvered his way through the crowd, avoiding the street performers like the plague.

“He’s the other person nominated for the Censorship from the Academy. Dad served with his father on the Senate one term, I think. The Purpura family is almost as old as the city, and it’s had money for just about as long. If I had to guess, I’d say he doesn’t like Atticus because he’s in the Equestrian Class and got nominated for the same position as him. But then again, I don’t think Antony likes anybody,” said Quintus.

“He doesn’t. But that doesn’t mean he’s wrong,” said Atticus.



“Don’t listen to him,” began Quintus.

“It doesn’t matter...you should probably walk Serena home,” he said, looking to Serena and then to Quintus, and then back to Serena.

He wanted to get as far away from this place and day as he physically could. “Valé,” he said, “And thank you, Quintus, for inviting me.”

He drew his coat around himself and started off into the crowd, leaving the two siblings alone.



## Chapter Seven

### Quintus Aurelius

Serena and Quintus were taking the long way back to the Medical School dormitories by the Valetudinarium.

Quintus was wearing a thin, disappointed smile as he carried his brown paper bag. He had hoped that taking Serena and Atticus to a play would be a relaxing prospect. Instead, he got the very antithesis of that, with people getting burnt, magicians getting lectured, and Antony being Antony.

The sun was in front of them as they walked; only just beginning to dip below the horizon of building-tops.

Quintus kept his sights on the violet edge between the incoming twilight and the out-going sunlight. He always loved sunsets.

They reminded him of the life he decided to live, all those years ago. It was a choice he had never come to regret: to follow the path of Sol.

The Cult of V believed that the gods, whose immortal souls never strayed far from earth, would find hosts among each generation. They would search among the living for a person who lived a life they favored, and then choose that host's body to cohabitate. The followers of the Cult would choose a god, and follow in their path in accordance with the ancient legends, in hope of becoming a host.

Some said the gods chose their hosts at birth, knowing who the newborn would become, but no one, not even the gods, fully understood the divine process.



A host could be anyone. A teacher, a reporter, an Anarchist, a gardener, a student. They were mundane things, and by extension, so were the gods. But it was still a noble prospect.

To follow the path of Sol, Quintus had taken his vow of chastity, but more than that, he had promised to be as kind and loving as he could to everyone. Both aspects of the path had felt right to him.

Now, he was at an impasse. He wanted to help Atticus as much as he could, and he hoped that Atticus would earn the Censorship and become the great orator he always wished he could be. But, he began to realize, the situation in the Senate Building was more complicated than he thought.

He glanced to his sister. She always hated politics. But he didn't think that was the reason she hadn't spoken up.

He could feel that something was off, the way that Atticus had left.

"Atticus told you he had romantic feelings for you," Serena said, interrupting his thoughts. She didn't look at him.

Quintus blinked in surprise. "Yes...a few months ago. But, you know that I have a vow to keep. He's a very important person to me, but he's not an exception."

"You're not even in the Cult of V. It's not like anyone has obligated you to keep that vow."

"That doesn't mean I don't believe what they believe, or that I don't have an obligation to myself," he started to walk slower, looking over to her. He knew that she believed in the old stories too. "How did you know that?"

"In the theater, he asked me about how you decided to follow the path of Sol. There's only one reason he'd know about that."

"...oh." Quintus swallowed. "Atticus...is a very lonely person. He doesn't get to know other people very easily on his own, and he wouldn't fall in love with someone he didn't know. In



that respect, I suppose we shouldn't be all that surprised," said Quintus, furrowing his brow thoughtfully.

"Quintus, we're practically the only friends he's got. And if Atticus was in the cult of V, he'd probably think you were a lesser god with how highly he holds you in his mind. I know you want to take care of him, but are you sure that's really healthy?" she asked.

"I told him he should go look for someone else, someone who can return the kind of love and affection he wants. And despite what you and Antony think, he isn't completely helpless. There are good reasons why he was chosen as a candidate to be Censor," said Quintus, almost indignantly.

"What would you do if he was chosen?" Serena asked.

"Does it matter?"

"Tell me."

Quintus sighed. "Well, first, I would congratulate him. It would be a big step in his life and his career. And then, I would do my very best to get chosen in my position. There is a lot of potential to help people and serve Caeruleus as a Tribune. Not to mention the Senate Building would be a treacherous place for Atticus without an ally."

Serena frowned. "Was one of the reasons you told him to find someone else to stop people from spreading rumors about him having a male lover before being married?"

"Well sure. I've seen that ruin other people's reputations, Serena. If he wasn't a candidate he wouldn't have to worry about something like that, because no one would care. But he is, so people do."

"But what if people do spread those rumors? What if people spread those rumors about you two when you're a Tribune and he's a Censor? The Senators would tear you limb from limb! I know you understand that it could be dangerous for Atticus, but did you ever stop to think how you might be in danger as well?" Serena shook her head, frustrated.



“I can handle anything they can throw at me,” replied Quintus, crossing his arms.

“That’s not the point.” She paused, and motioned to the broken window and red painted A in a circle on the front of small Post Office they passed. “We shouldn’t forget the Anarchists! If you become a Tribune there will instantly be hundreds upon hundreds of people who want you dead. Don’t get me wrong, I’m worried about Atticus too. He’s still my friend. But he is not my brother. You are. And I’m worried about you. You try to help and protect everyone you can, but who will protect you?”

Quintus glanced at the broken window front and graffitied wall.

“Dad always said we had to protect those who need it. And I’m certainly not the one who needs it the most,” said Quintus, letting his eyes drift back to the sunset. His footsteps kept their soft, rhythmic tempo as fewer and fewer people passed them.

Serena looked down and sighed. “Alright...if you say so, Quintus.”

After a moment of silence, Quintus smiled. “I think we need a bit more levity.”

“Levity?”

“Yeah. What did you think of the play?”

Serena shrugged and smiled. “It was a bit too inflammatory for my tastes.”

Quintus chuckled. “I’m sure the reviews will be absolutely scalding.”

It wasn’t long before they found themselves at the steps of the Medical School building. They stopped just short of the entrance.

“Hey, Serena, could you take care of this for me?” asked Quintus, extending the bag with the camera in it to her.

She sent him a raised eyebrow, but accepted the package. “Why?”



"I have no idea how to develop photographs," he said.

Serena laughed and shook her head. "I'll see what I can do."

Quintus leaned forward, and put his arms around her, hugging her warmly. She hugged him back with just as much affection.

"I'll see you later," he said, letting her go. He began to make his way back down the steps.

"Quintus!" she called, before he could leave.

He turned around.

"Be careful," she said. There was an awful seriousness about those two words. She was still worried.

Quintus nodded, smiling reassuringly for her.

Serena said nothing else as she opened and then closed the door to the Medical School building.

When she was gone from sight, Quintus turned around, his smile fading.

The sky grew dark as he left.





## Chapter Eight

### Walking Dreams

**A**tticus hadn't bothered to turn a light on in the dorm room; instead, he simply walked over to his bed, sat down, and laid his coat over his lap.

He looked at it blankly, his hands fiddling idly with the frayed hem of his coat sleeve.

There had been only two people he really felt he loved in this world. One of them was Serena. She was his crush in his late middle school days. But it had faded after she left for medical school, and he knew nothing would come of it.

The other one was Quintus. The only person who had always been there for him. The kindest, smartest, most wonderful, most beautiful person he had ever known. It had taken him years to confess his feelings, only to learn about Quintus' vows of celibacy.

He couldn't blame Quintus. Neither could he relinquish his longing as quickly as he wished. But in the end, he forced himself to find solace that his worst fears hadn't come to fruition: he hadn't ruined his friendship.

He had loved them both. How could he not love the only two people who ever truly knew him?

He closed his eyes, and forbade himself from wishful thoughts about holding someone tight in his arms. It would only serve to make him sadder.

But, he knew something inside of him wanted to feel sad.



Sadness was a very strong emotion. And strong emotions were almost always welcomed in Atticus' hazy, slow moving, sleep-deprived world.

A small teardrop formed in the corner of his eye, and then rolled down his face.

He heard someone unlocking the door. The instance it opened, Atticus jumped up, wiping the tear away.

"I'm sorry," he said quickly to Quintus, before he even had a chance to take the key from the lock, "for leaving so abruptly after the play."

Quintus blinked, and closed the door after pocketing the key. "It's alright."

He put a hand on Atticus' shoulder, gently guiding him back into a sitting position. Once he was situated, Quintus sat down on his own bed.

He sighed, and used one foot and then the other to slip his shoes off. "You should try to get some sleep before your assessment, now that we're just a few days away."

Atticus kept staring down at his coat

"What if I get it?"

"Hm?"

"What if I become the Censor? I'd have the whole country counting on me. If I can't even deal with Antony, how can I hope to deal with the Senate?"

"Atticus. You have the potential to be a great Censor," said Quintus firmly. "And if not that, then a great lawyer. Please don't isolate and put yourself down. Alright? I can't make you want to be the Censor, but you should know that you can do it."

Atticus slowly raised his eyes to meet his friend's. He nodded softly. "...okay."

Quintus smiled, and lay back on his bed. "I'm gonna get some shuteye now. You should too."



When it was all said and done, the dorm was just as dark as when Atticus came in.

Quintus was always quick to fall asleep, though easy to be roused. So it wasn't long before Atticus found himself lying under his blanket listening to the sound of his roommate snoring.

He knew he should be resting in deep slumber like Quintus, but his fixation on the cobweb in the dusty corner of the ceiling told him tonight wouldn't be an easy night for sleep. For as he began to drift in and out of consciousness, the images of terrible things met his mind.

He heard Quintus turn in his sleep, and, with a sigh, he made a decision.

As softly as he could, he slipped out of bed, putting on a pair of pants and his striped shirt. Once he had his coat and his precautionary revolver, he made for the door.

Just as he put his hand on the knob, he paused, and glanced back. He watched Quintus take one last deep breath. And then he opened the door as quietly as he could.

He had to try to outpace his nightmares. Maybe, if he was out long enough, his addled mind would find a walking dream instead.

He made his way through the urban maze straight towards the Plebian District. He didn't even break step when arrived at the Praetorian checkpoint at the bridge. He simply flashed his identification at the half-sleeping guards as he passed through.

His mission was already set in his mind. Magic would be his method for washing away his shame. The reprieve would only last a few moments, but he knew it would be worth it to see the unnatural lights and miracles of his own creation.

The show would be private for tonight, he decided, so he searched for an empty street.

It was a long quest under lunar ambiance and electric street lamps. With only the echo of his footsteps for company, he



marched through street after street, discarding each one after noticing someone move behind a window, or in the shadows.

At one point, he went by an open market. Nearly all the vendors had left; the stalls and spaces that still had their merchandise were chained down. The vendors that were still there sat up the instant Atticus passed, only to lean back in their chairs, disappointed, once he was gone.

The next street he came across had more abandoned buildings than the others. One concrete building wasn't even finished, presumed to never be completed. Atticus spied no lights from the windows, and no people on the road.

This would be the place.

And he knew just the story he needed. This time, it would not be in the form of a poem. Instead he decided to simply recite the raw, unfettered story as he remembered it.

He paused, cleared his throat, and closed his eyes as he began.

*“In ancient times there lived a lonely artist. A dreamer among men, though thought odd and estranged by the world. Never had he taken a lover for distaste of the unvirtuous, depraved, and worst of all, the mundane.”*

Atticus took a deep breath, stepping forward, his eyes still closed.

He thought about his own loneliness. He thought about Quintus and Serena, and wishfulness. And then, he let those thoughts go.

The act sent a tingle through his body, blood rushing to his cheeks. He could feel his magic gathering, though he dared not see it yet.

*“The man was taken with a passion to carve into ivory a beautiful woman. Her skin, though inanimately cool and pale, became smooth. Each intricate detail made by his hands brought her closer and closer to the ideal of life.”*



He smiled; his pace quickening.

Thoughts of the Censorship, and school, and Antony's words came to him. He had been so tired, and he knew he would be so tired. But in that moment he was filled with life and energy.

In that precise second he felt that maybe, quite possibly, he could be the Censor, he could be loved, he could be the Nocturne Magician, and he could have greatness. He could have very well been on the top of the world instead of on a dirty, deserted street.

*"The most strange artist could not help but fall in love with his caricature of beauty. He caressed her ivory limbs, and wished with all his soul that she would have blood and mind like him. He took it upon himself to kneel and beg before his sister, the host of Amor, that she might bless his love and grant his wish."*

Atticus spun on his heels, his arms outstretched and catching the cold air. The chill sent goose bumps up and down his skin.

Every sadness and lament was expelled and replaced with courage. He felt alive! More alive than he ever felt as an exhausted law student and just as alive as a statue who had just been transformed from ivory to humanity; blood pumping with a newfound vigor.

*"Be it through a lapse in Veritas or the novelty of his devotion, Amor was able to grant the artist's wish. From the statue came forth a human who would return the love its maker had given her."*

He closed his eyes even tighter in anticipation of his great reveal, where he would turn around and see what the fruits of his magic were. He didn't know what his magic had done, if it had assembled lights into patterns like the lens in a kaleidoscope or made something material out of thin air. Just from the feeling in his chest he could guess that it was amazing.



Atticus smile grew all the larger and all the wilder. "A great artist I may not be!" he declared. "But I am Atticus Permisc! And I..."

He opened his eyes and whirled around.

"...am flailing around in the dark..."

The smile dropped from his face.

There were neither lights nor magical effects. Not even a wisp.

Just a long, empty city street.

He had failed.

As the cold grey air pressed down on him, he suddenly felt more tired than he ever had.

"...maybe I'm not going to be any of those things...maybe Quintus was..." he stopped himself before the word "wrong" left his lips.

He shook his head, and began the long walk back to the dorm. There wasn't anything else he could accomplish from here.

"You idiot," he muttered to himself.



## Chapter Nine

### Claudia

The almost empty room was oddly peaceful.

It was derelict in nature and forgotten in practice.

The poorly constructed fireplace, table and broken mirror no longer appeared to be human implements, but structural components of a towering tree in an urban jungle.

It was still in the early morning hours as the sun crept into its nooks and crannies, dispelling the grey remnants of the night.

Normally, the room would be dead space. Static. Empty.

But the room was not empty then. Where once there was nothing, there was movement.

The woman curled into the corner stirred.

The hard concrete was cold like muted ice under her body and against her back. Her arms were wrapped around herself, doing their best to keep her warm as the white cloth of her dress failed miserably at the job. She was asleep, but now the intruding sun began to rouse her with its light and radiant warmth.

“Mmm,” she moaned as she rubbed her chin against her shoulder. Her eyelids fluttered, trying to keep her awake.

Finally, she took a deep breath of the chilling morning air, and wearily stood up. Her joints and muscles protested their treatment during her slumber in the corner.

She stretched, raising her arms above her head and interweaving her fingers together as she reached for the ceiling. It felt good to stretch.

As she stretched she ran her eyes over the small room.



It was concrete from floor to ceiling. Front and center was a wooden table, it's back left leg shorter than the rest, and its wood splintered and cracked. On the opposite wall was a doorway and two windows, the doorway was missing its door, and the windows were missing their glass panes, making the wall like a face with gaping holes instead of a mouth and eyes.

Through the holes she could see a cobblestone road.

"That doesn't look right..."

She paused as soon as the words left her mouth.

"Is that my voice?" she asked herself, surprised. She massaged her neck with her hand, "The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog," she said, feeling the vibrations from her throat.

She blinked. "I guess that is my voice...I didn't know it sounded like that..."

She turned her attention back to the table. There was a small round little thing lying there. She took a step closer and picked it up.

It was a yoyo, a child's toy.

With a curious fascination she slipped the knot over her finger, and held the toy firmly in her hand. The pale, wooden sides felt light in her palm.

"I wonder who left this here?" she mused out loud. She stopped herself, a more important question coming to mind. "What I am doing here?"

She blinked, trying to remember.

"I...I'm Claudia...and I'm here...because..." she grimaced, trying to produce an answer.

All she found was hollow darkness inside her head. Past all her senses and thoughts was a heavy, impenetrable veil, and it refused to show her the memories it hid.

She pressed her hand against her forehead, as if trying to knead something out.





She knew there had to be places, names, faces, times, and old flashes of emotions up there. She thought they were there before...but they weren't there anymore.

"Okay..." she said uneasily, mild alarm began to creep through her body. "What do I know? I-i know that my name is Claudia. I know that I'm a, um," she snapped her fingers trying to find the right word, "a magician."

She looked down at her open hand, "I can snap." She looked to her other hand holding the yoyo. She let it go, watching as it fell to the ground, trailing its tether. She jerked her hand up, and the yoyo jerked up too, but fell limply back to the ground. "And I can't use a yoyo. Guess I'll work on that."

In spite of herself, she smiled. "I suppose that's a good place to start."

She glanced down and saw she was wearing a white dress that fell loosely to her ankles, but had no sleeves. She sighed, and turned around, looking for any other clue as to where she was and how she got there.

There was a fireplace on the back wall, and a broken mirror gleaming in the morning light above it. Perhaps this had once been someone's home.

"Hello..." she said to herself. She looked at her face through the mirror as if it was the first time.

Her hair was white blond, and it fell just a tad past her shoulder; it was straighter and neater than she thought it would be after sleeping up against a concrete wall. Her skin was fair, almost pale-looking, but she watched some color return to her face as her blood circulation went back to normal after being stuck in a sitting position for so long. She blinked; her eyes were sky blue. She also noticed she was bit taller than she had expected, almost lanky.



She ran her hand through her hair. “Okay, nice to meet you. Claudia. Glad we got that out of the way.” She turned back to the door and the road beyond it.

She spied a few people walking along. Every single one of them walked down the dirty road with a purpose, and didn’t notice her inside the room. Unsurprisingly, she didn’t recognize any of them.

She frowned as a sudden realization came over her. She would have to go out onto that road.

That road which might as well have been an alien world.

Moments of complete uncertainty felt intuitively rare to her. When the possibility of finding enemy or friendship, life or death, war or peace, love or hate, night or day, and safety or danger are equal fifty/fifty precisely. Moments like those were feared.

Claudia felt the void in her mind, and it was terrifying in all its unknown. She had no knowledge of what was outside that empty door, and with no evidence of normality in her world, she realized she could make no assumptions.

As it stood, there were equal chances of her being killed or offered a sandwich after she stepped onto the street.

She couldn’t remember a sunrise, or who she was. For all she knew neither could have existed before this day.

She closed her eyes. “Well...no use standing around here. Maybe someone will recognize me, or a memory will trigger. Or maybe someone will have hot chocolate.”

She ran her hands over her bare arms, trying to ignore the cold.

“Come on, Claudia,” she said, forcing herself to walk towards the doorway.

She hesitated at the threshold. The strange mundaneness stared her down. It was a normal Caerulean road, with a small



group of children playing on the corner and a man selling newspapers across the way.

“It’s just an ordinary street,” she said. “*Whatever that is...*” something in the back of her mind replied.

Nonetheless, the sound of her own voice gave her courage, and she boldly stepped out onto the street and into the world.

Her sandals clapped against the cobblestone road, one foot put carefully in front of the other.

She traveled aimlessly for the moment, merely an observer.

She listened to the shouts and giggles of the children, and the holler of the newspaper man. The sounds were sharp and their tiny echoes almost too real.

She could smell the sweet, fatty, and fried smells coming from the open market down the street, and then, beneath that, was something more metallic, artificial, and chemical, like a factory.

She walked towards the market, her eyes darting from one building to the next. Every off-white color of concrete walls, dampish brown of wooden siding, or rusty red of old iron trusses felt so different from the other. It was all so close to be touched, but at the same time so foreign in her mind.

The street merchants around her sold clothing, food, soap: anything and everything. But the clothing wasn’t like hers. There were no white stolas, only jeans and tunics and shirts.

There was so much to see and smell and hear and-

“Hey!” said a man as she bumped into him.

She jumped back shyly.

The man she had collided with turned around to face her. He was tall, had sun tanned skin, wore a grey woolen jacket and had his wavy black hair in a ponytail. His eyes narrowed with suspicion when he saw her.

He had been talking to two other black-skinned people. One was a woman with tightly braided hair who wore a pair of



black and red fingerless gloves. The other was a young man with short, fuzzy hair and a leather jacket.

“Sorry,” said Claudia timidly as she tried to back away. She did her best to try to walk around them but the man she had bumped into held her back by her shoulder.

“It’s not often you see someone wearing a stola around these parts. A tad out of style you know, by about...one hundred years. Unless, of course, you happen to be living in the Senatorial District. You look a little lost,” he said.

“Come on Traj, we don’t have time for her right now. The others are waiting,” said Crassus, glancing to the woman with them.

Claudia swallowed. The three didn’t exactly look very friendly, but at the same time, there were some questions she needed answered.

Traj sighed, looking like he was about to turn around and do just as Crassus advised.

She hesitated for moment. “W-where I am?”

That was enough for Traj to give pause.

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t know where I am.”

He raised his eyebrows, “You’re on the corner of Fero Vista, in the north end of the Plebian District, you keep going down straight you will hit the river, going the other way you’ll hit the industrial district.”

Claudia looked at him blankly.

“Are you from around here?” he asked, intrigued.

“I...I don’t know,” Claudia admitted, embarrassed by the fact.

“What do you mean you don’t know?” he asked. “You have to be from somewhere.”



"I can't remember. I can't remember anything, actually. But I was in this concrete building down the way, if that's what you mean," she said, shifting nervously.

"I think she has amnesia or something," said the women, exchanging a look with Crassus.

"Funny that a Senatorial girl with amnesia would end up out here," said Traj. He frowned.

"I don't know I'm from the Senatorial District," replied Claudia. The way he said Senatorial, it was like he was spitting out something dirty. She didn't want to be associated with that.

Traj stuffed his hands into his coat pockets and looked at her dubiously.

"What do you know?"

"I know that..." she searched her mind for a noteworthy fact, "I'm a magician."

"Really?" asked Traj quickly, his undivided attention suddenly hers. "You're a magician?"

"Is that why you're wearing a stola?" asked the woman behind him curiously.

"I don't see how this matters," said Crassus, his foot tapping impatiently. "She's not our problem. If someone wants to beat up a northerner in a ridiculous outfit they can do it themselves. I hate to be the responsible one around here, but we don't have time for damsels in distress. We've got work to do."

"We aren't going to leave her, Crassus," said Traj firmly.

"Why?" asked Crassus incredulously.

"She's lost, alone with no idea who she is or where she is. The way I see it, she's just been born as one of us. We can't just be a bunch of rowdy teenagers, or the ruthless barbarians the Praetorians see us as. We have to protect our own."

Crassus looked at Claudia thoughtfully, mulling it over.

He clicked his heels together, and brought his hand up for a mock salute. "Alright, if you say so, General Trajan."



The woman smiled thinly, and mimicked the salute. “Yeah, whatever. We could always use a couple more recruits.”

Claudia let out a breath of relief. Crassus’ talk of beating up a northerner had made her a bit anxious.

Traj extended his hand to her and slowly, she reached forward. He took her by the forearm, and not knowing what else to do, Claudia returned the action and then they shook like they would a warm hand shake. “My name is Trajan Catulli, but you can call me Traj. These are my friends, Crassus, and his sister Felicia. What’s your name?”

“Claudia.”

Traj smiled. “Well then, Claudia, I have a question for you. How would you like to be an Anarchist?”

Claudia blinked, the word sounded familiar. “What’s an Anarchist?”

“Ah,” began Traj, beaming proudly. “An Anarchist is a person who stand up for themselves, and challenges false authority. An Anarchist is a dangerous person. But also a free person. The freest kind of person there is.”

Claudia thought about that. She had never been an Anarchist before.

“I’ll give it a try,” she said.

“No. No, no, no, no,” said Traj, letting go of her arm to point at her with a lecture like finger. “You can’t just ‘give it a try’ when it comes to being one of the Burning Fases. If you want freedom, true freedom, and if you want to save people’s lives, then you have to fight with all your might. If you want to come with us, then you will come to fight alongside us.”

Claudia studied the three Anarchists before her. They were cut from a rough batch, and on some level, she knew they could hurt her if they wanted to.

“We protect our own,” said Crassus, “I don’t who you are, or where you came from, but if you need help...if you need a



family, then the Burning Fasces can give you one. For all I know, you could be just another one of them street magicians who got a bump on the head.”

“But if you’re lying about the amnesia, things might get a bit messy between us,” said Felicia, her words a frothy mixture of a warning and a thinly veiled threat.

“Hey,” said Crassus, “intimidating the new ones is my job.”

It was Felicia’s turn to roll her eyes at him. “Yes, and you have a complete monopoly on it.”

“My point is, Claudia, if you want this family, you’re going to have to fight for it,” said Traj.

Claudia rubbed her thumb over the yoyo in her palm nervously. “I don’t know how to fight.”

Traj smiled. “We’ll teach you. Trust me, it doesn’t take all that much to become dangerous.”

A family. An identity.

Something she likely already had.

“Will you help me find out who I am?” she asked.

“I’ll give it a try,” replied Traj cheekily. “But first, how about you come with us. A couple of our friends are waiting, and I’m sure they’ll be thrilled to meet you.”

He beckoned for her to follow him.

She was led away from the open market, and away from the tiny concrete room.

Slowly, the roads they walked down grew smaller and smaller until they walked her to the very end of an alleyway deep in the Plebian District.

At the very end of the alley way was a door. But, as Claudia squinted, she realized it wasn’t a door. Only the image of a door painted in blood red on the wall.

“So...where were your friends?” asked Claudia, looking around confused.



“Oh, just past here,” said Traj. He turned to Crassus. “Can you pass me that crowbar?”

Crassus tossed him the crowbar that was discarded on the side of the ally.

Claudia took a small step back as he grasped it with both hands.

He swung it down, and wedged it in a crack where the two walls met. He pushed his weight onto it forwards, and then backwards, pulling the crack open. Once it was big enough, he threw the crowbar down and resorted to using his hands. Crassus and Felicia helped him to slide the fake wall to the side, as it was seemingly designed to do.

“You have a door painted on a wall that’s not actually a wall but actually a door?” asked Claudia, eyebrows raised.

Felicia smiled. “Redundancy save lives.”

The not-door-wall-door revealed a wide open space, a veritable lot that was surrounded on all four sides by other buildings, with no ceiling save the clear sky.

The walls were covered top to bottom, every inch with colorful graffiti, scrawlings, and pictures.

She didn’t know what all the words and pictures meant, but they felt powerful.

There were calls for death, and life.

There were proclamations of rebellion, and sanctity.

There were depictions of dying, and fighting.

There was both blood, and flesh.

And then there were the Anarchists themselves.

They were unlike any sort of people Claudia had seen before, though that wasn’t saying much. They appeared to be a group of all colors and races, even though Claudia didn’t know what those races were.

The dark clothing they wore was accented and streaked with red; their jeans and shirts were frayed, and torn.





They were a tough looking bunch. Tattooed, pierced and messy haired. Some had weapons on person, a gun tucked under their belt, a bat held lazily in their hand, or a knife in a sheath on their belt.

There must have been at least two-hundred of them gathered there in secret.

They all paused their idle conversations and deliberations, and cast their eyes towards the newcomers.

"Hey! General Trajan!"

"Where've you been, man?"

"We've been waiting."

"Been busy busting Praetorian ass and saving damsels in distress?"

"Who's the new chick?"

Traj smiled, and jumped up onto a pile of rubble and gravel left in the lot. "Sorry I'm late, everybody. But, now that I'm here, let the Burning Fasces hereby convey this wartime meeting. Was everyone able to make it?"

In an instance the lot fell silent. The assembled group parted, allowing a woman with a dark red stain on her shirt to step forward.

She looked disheveled, and her eyes were red as if she had been crying. But her eyes and face were dry now.

Traj's smiled disappeared.

"Bacchus got stopped by some Praetorians on the way here...they shot him," she said stoically.

"Did he survive?" Traj asked.

She shook her head.

"And the Praetorians?"

"They won't be stopping anybody else," she replied, looking Traj straight in the eyes.

They held their gazes for a quiet moment.



"I'm sorry, Agatha," he said solemnly. "Did he have any family, besides you?"

"His mother."

Traj turned to the others. "Have her evacuated to Saxum. We have some people who can take her in there, right?"

A few of the Anarchists nodded.

"Good. You alright with that plan, Agatha?"

"Yeah, go ahead," said the blood stained woman, she briefly glanced at Claudia before turning around, making for the back wall. Once again, the others parted for her.

There was only one part of the wall that wasn't completely covered in graffiti, a small square, not even as wide as Claudia could stretch her arms out. There were a smattering of vertical lines scratched into the box, and there were six words above it. A single bolded phrase: **THOSE WHO DIED FOR THE FIRE.**

There were six rows of seven full tallies, the ninth incomplete. 214 in total marks.

Agatha withdrew from her pocket a crimson tinged switchblade and scratched into the wall a 215th mark.

Claudia swallowed. It appeared that for as dangerous an Anarchist was, it was also dangerous to be one. She glanced to the entrance. It was sealed shut. There was no turning back now.

"Bacchus's sacrifice won't be in vain. When the Republic falls, we will remember him, like we remember the others who have died, and those who will die. But until that day, we must keep our minds clear, our eyes open, and set forward," he paused, and looked over to Claudia. "But there will always be more willing to fight against the Praetorians. We got a new fighter with us. Come here, come up here, Claudia," he beckoned. Hesitantly, Claudia joined him on the small pile of gravel.

"She's a street magician so I hope you excuse her if she's a bit eccentric. She has lost something very important to her: her memories. A straight up amnesiac, probably got a nasty bump on



the head. We will stand by her as she stands by us,” he took her hand and lifted it above her head into the air. “Claudia, will you fight and defend your fellow Plebs and Burning Fasces against those who wish to harm and subjugate us as well as yourself?”

All eyes were on her. Every ear was tuned in.

“I will,” she spoke as loud as she could. Her voice was a lonely sound with everybody watching silently.

“Most importantly, will you uphold the creed and spirit of the Burning Fasces? Will you be fearless?”

Everyone waited for her answer.

She took a deep breath. “Yes.”

Traj let go of her hand, and withdrew something from his pocket. “Welcome to the Burning Fasces, Claudia,” he said, offering her a simple red bandanna.

The crowd of Anarchists bursts into lauds of shouting, hooting and hollering.

Claudia smiled, listening to their roar of encouragement. She took the bandanna.



## Chapter Ten

### The Censor of Caeruleus

**A**n incessant pounding on the door was what woke Atticus up the day of the assessment. He slothfully lifted his head up and glanced at the clock. It was an hour after the alarm was supposed to have gone off.

“Atticus, wake up!” shouted Quintus’ from the hall. “You’re late!”

His eyes finally snapped into full awareness.

“Just come in.”

“I can’t. *You* locked the door!” said Quintus.

Atticus blinked, confused. “No I didn’t.” He squinted at the brass door knob, confirming his assertion.

“I can’t get it open.” The door handle rattled. “There’s a piece of metal lodged in the lock. How does something like that even happen?!”

Atticus hopped from his bed and tried to open the door from his end, to no avail.

“Maybe I can use the window,” he mused, turning around.

“Stand away from the door!” ordered Quintus as he stopped shaking it.

“What?” was all he could manage before Quintus rammed his shoulder forward. The doorframe cracked and the round handle slammed into his back.

“Ah! Sorry!”

Atticus groaned in response on the floor.

“Come on, we don’t have much time!” urged Quintus, helping him to his feet.



He turned red when saw Serena was in the hallway, watching as he floundered about in his underwear. She smiled thinly and nodded before turning around.

Atticus shook his head, trying to concentrate. He had set the clothes he needed aside yesterday. Today he abandoned his trench coat and muddy boots; instead he quickly and haphazardly wiggled into a black suit and dress shoes. They felt restricting, but he wasn't wearing them for himself. It further annoyed him that the toga he used for court cases was no longer suitable for interviews and assessments in this day and age.

Once he was half-way put together he was out the door, a striped bow tie in one hand, and a comb in the other.

"Thank you for coming, Serena. I wasn't expecting you," said Atticus gratefully, spinning around as he moved forward, trying to put on his tie.

"Well someone has to make sure you don't permanently injure yourself," replied Serena, patting him where the doorknob had slammed into his body.

"Sorry about that bruise," said Quintus as they all walked briskly out of the dormitories and onto the campus grounds. "We should hurry. The cable car is going to leave soon."

"Yeah. I don't want to make the most powerful group of people in the country have to wait on me," said Atticus, breaking into a quicker sprint while still trying to tie his tie.

He only made it a couple steps cutting through the grassy field before he fell flat on his face, but he scrambled back to his feet before Quintus or Serena got to him.

"I'm fine!" he exclaimed, back on track.

Quintus and Serena exchanged a look, but didn't break step as they made their way to the cable car stop.

The three clamored aboard the cable car seconds before it pulled away. As soon as he was in, Atticus collapsed into a seat,



and his head fell against the window as he tried to catch his breath. Running wasn't really his strong suit.

He felt the gentle acceleration of the car, and watched the city pass by as they made their way into the Senatorial District.

Their destination was on the banks of the Sominculus river, nestled among all the different shades of precious stones like a crowned sapphire jewel. And there was no gem in all of Caeruleus that could ever compare, not even the home of the richest aristocrat.

The Senate Building was over two hundred acres of carefully assembled sapphire, hundreds of thousands of individual pieces cut and put together without mortar, like an intricate puzzle that no one could hope to solve. It was reinforced with steel beams, built to last.

It was a remnant of the age of kings and palaces, and now it was the hub of the Caerulean Republic.

After the cable car slowed to a stop, the three made a beeline for the front entrance, through Veritas Square towards the translucent blue steps.

There were five doors at this entrance, the outer four devoted to the four primal gods: one black like shadows for Mintiri, one dark blue and speckled with diamonds like stars for Veritas, one pure white for Virtus, and one red like blood for Vita. The center door was a mosaic-like swirl of silver and sapphire made for the gods Caelum and Terra, who were patrons of the city. Atticus could recite the symbolism by heart; he had taken a Classics class last semester.

He strode up the deep blue steps, past six proud columns and the grand façade they held up, his eyes fixed anxiously on the center door.

He did his best not to sweat, since he would be in front of the Senate in only a few minutes, but it was hard to stay calm.



He readied himself to push open the heavy, silver and blue door, when he noticed the Praetorian Guard holding up a hand for him to stop.

“Hold it,” he said.

Unlike the Praetorian Guards Atticus had dealt with at the bridge into the Plebian District, this one was dressed in a traditional uniform with a bronze chest plate, an ornate iron tipped spear and a plumed helmet. Though Atticus couldn’t see it, he assumed the guard had a gun on him to defend the entrance.

“We have to be in there right now,” said Quintus quickly. “This is Atticus Permisc; he’s being assessed to be the next Censor.”

“Those are today? Huh. Can I see some identification?”

Serena and Quintus easily produced their student identification cards. But Atticus couldn’t find anything as he searched through his pant pockets.

He froze as it suddenly dawned on him that he hadn’t picked up his before he left.

The two Aurelius siblings looked at him expectantly. He put a hand over his mouth as dread poured into him.

Serena rubbed the bridge of nose. “Atticus you have some kind of ID with you, right?”

“No identification, no entrance. That’s the policy,” said the guard, crossing his arms.

“Identification? Well, let me think,” said Atticus, trying to come up with something quick. “Besides the badges given to public officials and civil servants, the other forms of ID that would be acceptable would be a student identification card, obviously, a public welfare certificate, a birth certificate, a death certificate and in rare occasions, acts of divine providence. Correct?”

The guard shrugged apathetically. “Sure.”

“And, as you can see, I am wearing a suit with a black dinner jacket-”



“Atticus,” Quintus cut in, trying to get him to hurry through his lawyer-esque oratory.

“...well, as a person who has no formal permanent residence, I’ve found it best to store personal documents in a safe place that I’ll always have with me. For example, that one coat that I’ve always had in my closet but never wear because it’s shmancy and stupid.”

Atticus grinned and reached into his jacket pocket. He victoriously pulled out a folded and wrinkled piece of parchment.

He swiftly showed it to the guard, before pushing the heavy, sapphire and silver door in.

“That’s not a safe place for your birth certificate,” said Quintus flatly. “What happens if you wash the jacket while it’s in there?”

“So what if things get a little wet? I think I’ve done that three times already,” replied Atticus, not looking back as they entered the Senate Building.

Serena did her best to hold in an amused giggle.

Atticus just smirked as he walked briskly down the tall and wide hall. Civil servants and officials swarmed all around them the deeper they went, busy doing the work of government. A few who walked slower, looked older, and held themselves higher noticed the three and sent them appraising glances, wondering if the boy with the crooked, asymmetrical tie and dark bags under his eyes would be joining their ranks.

They followed the signs posted on the hallway corners towards the Senate Floor. Some of the non-structural walls were made of wood and plaster, and though their minimalist and clean design reflected the air of officialness around the place, it was the glow from the sapphire that gave it its true ambiance. A place of power.

At the end of the hall was a double oak door, guarded by another two Praetorian Guards.





“Remember what you practiced. Try to stay calm. And whatever you do, don’t mention government corruption,” Quintus advised.

Atticus pressed and ran his hands nervously down his jacket and the top of his pant legs, trying to smooth out the wrinkles one last time. “I’ll do my best.”

The guards stopped them just before they could go through the double doors. “Only candidates are allowed past here,” the one on the right said.

“Oh, okay...” Atticus turned to Quintus and Serena. “I guess I’ll see you two on the other side. Of course, it’ll be the same side of this door, just a different side of...you know, a thing.”

Quintus smiled and shook his head. “Shut up,” he said as he wrapped his arms around Atticus, pulling him into a hug.

It took him by surprise. But a moment passed, and he smiled too, briefly forgetting his anxiety and returned the embrace.

“Thanks,” said Atticus as Quintus pulled away.

“Good luck in there,” said Serena sincerely.

“I’ll need it,” replied Atticus. He swallowed, but finally steered himself back to the guards, who opened the door for him. Serena sighed when they closed behind him.

“Come on, I think I saw a bench over there,” said Quintus, motioning to the hall behind them.

Serena took a small tin out of her pocket, “I saved some saltines from lunch, figured it would be good to have a snack while we waited.” She offered one to Quintus.

“So are you going to tell me?” asked Quintus, taking a bite out of the cracker.

“What?”

“Why you came. Usually I have to ask all nicely to pull you away from the hospital, but this time you volunteered,” he explained as he sat down, taking another bite of the cracker.



“Well...I guess I was curious,” she admitted. “After our talk at the theater I began to wonder why you’ve always been so attached to Atticus. The reason I always like him around was because he so...” she searched for the right word, “passive. But you wouldn’t be interested in having a person like that around, would you?”

Quintus smiled. “You’re right, I wouldn’t be.”

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The hall that led to the Senate floor had six wooden chairs with blue and white striped cushions set on one side. On the other side were wide, tall doors intricately carved with promises of the rule of law, Virtue and engravings of the Fasces.

Four chairs were occupied, all by men in military uniforms. Atticus recognized the uniforms of two Navy Sailors, and two Legionnaires. While all four held themselves straight and dignified, the Legionnaires looked more confident in their odds; the Sailors twitched nervously every now and then when they thought no one was looking.

Atticus knew the history: every Censor for the past two hundred years had either been a former Legionnaire or a former Senator.

Antony wasn’t there, though. He must have already gone to the Senate Floor. Which meant Atticus was up next and he had made it just in time.

“Good...great...excellent...” he said quietly to himself, glancing left and right, wondering when his time would come.

He noticed a man guarding the doors to the Senate Floor, but he wasn’t a Praetorian or a Legionnaire. He did have the Senate’s crest on his blue tunic though.



He looked straight ahead, his eyes trained on a single speck of dust on the opposite wall, as if he was itching to go and clean it into oblivion.

He had red, curly hair, like a faux fire made from dyed cotton balls and glue.

Unlike all the other people Atticus had seen guarding doors, he was standing directly where the door would swing open.

“I...I don’t really mean to tell you how to do your job, but that door looks like it might hit you when it opens. I’m just saying because something like that just happened to me today, and maybe you should stand off to the side.”

“He will use the other door,” the doorman said, his eyes not moving off that single speck.

“Oh...okay,” said Atticus, turning to take a seat in one of the chairs when suddenly the door opened behind the doorman, hitting him squarely in the back.

He groaned indignantly, but did not yield.

“Other door,” he said through clenched teeth.

The person trying to gain entrance paused for a moment before reluctantly following the instruction.

When Antony walked back into the hall he was smiling, a smug little smile. But he stopped in his tracks when he noticed Atticus. He looked surprised for some reason.

“Atticus Permisc may now enter the Senate Floor,” announced the doorman.

Atticus straightened his jacket before sidestepping Antony, and going through the doorway.

The Senate Floor’s ceiling was like the sky. Just as blue, and just as tall. The dome was made of thinner sapphire than the rest of the building and the sunlight filtered through, past the chrome steel spires that held it up, illuminating the chamber as if it were a shallow sea.



The blue light struck Atticus like a wave, engulfing him. He blinked, pausing a moment for his eyes to adjust. As he started moving forward carefully, he looked to the tall, marble stands seating the Senators. At a glance he could see that half the Senate was dressed in traditional white togas with a purple stripe and tunic, and the other half in patterned three piece suits. The aristocrats and the industrialists. The contrast in attire was supposedly a political statement, started when an industrialist was too lazy to change into his toga.

There were two stands, opposite each other, and though there were clumps of both factions on either side, the stands were designed to make it as easy as possible to get up and shout at the opposition.

There was a podium in the walkway between the stands meant for speeches, but today the podium had been repurposed.

The one hundred Senators in total were murmuring amongst themselves when Atticus came in, but they hushed into silence when he took the stand.

Atticus shifted nervously as he stopped, taking out the few notecards he had prepared ahead of time and putting them on the podium.

Sitting at a small table in front of him was Praetor Julius Germanicus, and the two Consuls, Pliny and Tarquin. The Consuls were the ones who had the real power out of the three; today the Praetor's role was to carry out parliamentary procedure. Pliny with his skinny, mouse-like appearance and glasses was the aristocrat, Tarquin with his square jaw and heavy beard was the industrialist.

As for the Praetor, his skin was a sickly pallid tone, his eyes were bloodshot, and his body had a floppy, flabby look to it. He wore a toga, but his wealth was tied to his family's copper mines on their ancestral lands, making him a synthesis of the two factions as his he maintained his aristocracy heritage of



maintaining wealth in his lands, but instead of using it for farming and rent, it was put towards modern production.

Germanicus cleared his throat. “Salvé, I am...” He broke into a rough coughing fit before he could finish. Tarquin sighed and Pliny rolled his eyes.

The Praetor paused to regain his breath, and then retried.

“...I’m Julius Germanicus, the Praetor elect of the 407th Caerulean Senate. State your name and your intent.”

Atticus swallowed, his eyes glancing to the Senators on their perches.

“My name is Atticus Aberacus Permisc, and I intend to submit my name for the position of Censor of the 407th Caerulean Senate.”

Julius nodded, but stopped to scratch his nose before proceeding. “What qualifies you to be considered for this honorable position, Mr. Permisc?”

“Excellent question,” said Atticus, glancing to his notecards. It was the state sanctioned time for boasting.

“I interned at the office of the Tribune of the Plebs, under Tribune Cornelius, for 284 days. I learned how the everyday operations of such an office are conducted, and the importance of such a position. I’ve been successful in the overwhelming majority of my court cases, only losing two out of the fifteen, including a victory over the former Tribune of the Interior, Mico Tullius. I am twenty-third in my class, and my grades have been exemplary ever since being inducted into Caeruleus State Academy. I have studied in great detail the duties and responsibilities of a Censor by examining the actions of former Censors and their effectiveness at managing the Senate Building, the National Archives and the formulation of laws in partnership with the Tribune of Plebs to be presented in front of the Senate for debate, amendments, rejection or approval.” His voice was a lonely echo on the Senate Floor.



“That resume you got there, it’s real neato,” said Pliny, leaning back in his hand carved stone chair and crossing his legs.

“I...I beg your pardon, Sir.”

“Don’t worry about it, continue,” said Tarquin quickly.

“Yes, of course,” Julius nodded. “The Senate may now submit queries to Atticus Permisc.”

In an instant the room was in an uproar, a thousand different questions, declarations, and disagreements in the air. Atticus leaned back, not knowing where to start.

Julius sighed, and pointed randomly off to his right, “I hereby recognize...that guy.”

An aristocrat stood up. “I understand you are a part of the Equestrian Class, Mr. Permisc. But what is your ancestry?”

Atticus hesitated. He hadn’t been expecting that question, especially as his first. Chances were they wanted someone with noble status like Antony. Unfortunately, most Permisc’s were either Legion grunts or grape pickers

“Um...my father is Valens Permisc, my mother is Carmen Permisc; both represent Caeruleus as the Ambassadors to the Sylvanian Kingdom. My paternal family had many men in the Legion and Navy, and has predominantly remained in the Equestrian Class. However...I haven’t lived with my parents in a long time,” replied Atticus. It felt uneasy telling them that. The “um” at the beginning didn’t help his case much.

“I recognize...” the Praetor motioned flippantly to his left, “the fellow with the eyepatch.”

This time it was a mean looking aristocrat. “Consider this scenario: what course of action would you take if the country of Rubicund were to declare war?”

This was an easy one; he leaned forward with confidence on the podium. Unfortunately, the podium didn’t agree with his confidence, and it fell over, dragging him with it.



Julius chuckled as Atticus scrambled on the ground, trying to lift the podium back up, but that chuckle quickly turned into a raspy smoker's cough. Pliny and Tarquin smirked and exchanged a knowing look.

"W-well my role would of course be to facilitate an emergency session of the Senate," said Atticus, his cheeks burning red with embarrassment, "and do everything in my power to alert the Senate body as quickly as possible and ensure a quorum is assembled."

He finally got the podium up-right again, and immediately pretended as if nothing had happened.

"I would then work in my auxiliary capacity to aid in the drafting of complementary legislation to support the war effort under the directive of the Senate and the Consul. It will be necessary to contact specialized officials in the Department of Foreign Affairs so they can give testimony regarding Rubicund's military capabilities," he said, as dignified as he could manage.

Another Industrialist stood up, this time without being called on. It didn't really matter since Julius was too busy concentrating on lighting a long brown cigar and Pliny had started to doodle man-eating plants in his notepad. Tarquin was still paying attention, but only with distant bemusement.

"Mr. Permisc, would you mind telling us who you voted for in the last Praetor election?"

"Who I voted for?" he repeated. The Senator nodded.

Atticus glanced down nervously, and scratched the back of his neck. He hadn't voted for anyone. That was the day he had woken up in the mausoleum, and he hadn't exactly been feeling up to going to the polls. But that probably wasn't what the Senate wanted to hear.

"I...voted for Agricola."

There was a small murmur of approval through the ranks of Senators. Even Julius tilted his head and nodded in understanding.



“You defended an Anarchist in the courts. Are you a sympathizer?!” someone shouted angrily from the back row.

Atticus blinked, the accusatory tone catching him off guard. “A sympathizer?” he asked in disbelief.

The Senate didn’t reply, waiting for his answer.

He glanced to the three codgers in front of him who’s indifference to him had long ago slid into belittlement. He needed to make himself stand out to them, lest he resign to become a complete laughing stock.

There was a maelstrom he was about to unleash. But he needed something he really resented to put him in the mood. His actual, mild distaste for Anarchists wasn’t enough...he needed something stronger.

“*Crickets!*” he muttered under his breath. The foul taste and texture instantly flashed in memory across his tongue.

“Pardon?” asked Julius through his cigar.

“I am a lawyer by trade, Senators. I take the cases that are handed to me, and I do what I believe is right. I know for a fact that Mr. Bacchus is not an Anarchist! The results of his trial are more than self-evident. If my client had confessed to the crime than absolutely I would have done everything in my power to convince him to plead guilty. But I was not about to let an innocent man die for another’s crime. Given the chance to serve you all, I would do so with the same diligence I swear to my clients in court.”

Atticus smiled proudly as a few of the Senators took notes and tapped their chins in thought.

Julius scrunched up his nose and frowned. “My father always wanted me to be a lawyer...”

Tarquin chuckled. “For the sake of all the accused in the nation, I’m glad you didn’t.”

Pliny joined in the laughter.





Another industrialist called out, “Just out of curiosity, Mr. Permisc, what would you do if the Anarchists, or another rogue group, tried to attack the Senate Building?”

The consular laughter died out.

“If they tried to attack the Senate Building?!” Atticus shuffled through his notecards needlessly, knowing they were useless. “Well...I...could do everything in my power to aid an evacuation into the National Archives. But...I’m not a military commander, or in control of the Praetorian Guard...I have no idea what I’d be able to do stop them. I mean I’m just one man, and not a very strong one. I....I don’t know,” admitted Atticus reluctantly. As soon as he said it he wanted to slam his head against the podium. Besides mentioning government corruption, saying he didn’t know was probably the worst possible thing he could do.

He bit his lip so hard he could taste blood.

Pliny adjusted his glasses and shifted forward. He had noticed.

From then on he stumbled over every question and every sentence. A voice inside his head kept shouting “Idiot! What do you think you’re doing?!” along with a large number of profanities.

His heart was pumping urgently, and he was sweating more than when he had been running. All the stares from Senators made him feel like a bug under a magnifying glass, and they could see every bead of sweat, nervous tic, and slip of the tongue.

But eventually, the seemingly endless flow of questions about his beliefs, history and knowledge of Caeruleus dried up.

After Atticus landed his final stuttering reply to a question about grain subsidiaries, Consul Tarquin glanced to his watch and decided to give him mercy.

“I think he’s had enough, boys,” he called out. “What do you think, Pliny?”



He smiled. “My minds made up.”

“Mine too,” replied Tarquin.

The Praetor took his cue.

“Mr. Permisc, I believe we have concluded your assessment. On behalf of the Senate I thank you for entering this submission. Valé,” said Julius, briefly taking his cigar out of his mouth.

Atticus breathed a sigh of relief; a crushing weight lifted off of his shoulders. He wished he could collapse right there and bask in the blue light like no one was watching, and rejoice the tiny victory of surviving the Senatorial Assessment. Even if he had totally bombed it.

Julius cleared his throat. “You can go now,” he said flatly.

Atticus' eyes widened as he realized he hadn't moved.

“Thank you, Praetor Germanicus!” he said, a bit too loud. “And also thank you to the Senate for giving me this opportunity. Valé.”

He then turned around, and went back to the hall, taking the door without the red haired man behind.

As soon as the door closed behind him, he was overwhelmed with silence, cut off from the Senate's deliberations.

Antony watched him attentively for any sign of either victory or failure, but Atticus ignored him.

He made his way with a lowly look towards the last empty chair in the hall. When he sat down, he leaned to his right and crossed his arms, not just to get as far away from Antony as possible, but also to make himself as small as he felt on the inside.

He had failed. It didn't matter if the Senate was being lenient towards Academy candidates; he didn't think he could have possibly done any worse.

He glanced to the door that lead back to the main corridor, where Quintus was waiting. He felt a small whirlpool of despair swirl in his stomach. No doubt Quintus would skate through his



assessment with greasy ease. What would happen if Quintus was chosen and he wasn't? Would he lose Quintus forever?

He swallowed, his mind busy constructing lonely scenarios.

As the minutes drifted on and on for the candidates in the hallway, they each dealt with the wait in their own way. The two Legionnaires began to fall asleep in their stiff poses, the Sailors began scratching themselves, Antony tapped the arm of his chair impatiently, the doorman began to go cross-eyed with anger at his speck, and Atticus was left staring with dread at his fancy shoes.

When the door opened, it seemed to shatter the static anticipation in the room. Praetor Germanicus paused to crack his back before proceeding into the room

"The Senate has made their decision. The majority spoke clearly and loudly. So loud that they gave me a headache," he paused, either for dramatic effect or to acknowledge his mild pain. "The Senate has chosen Atticus Permisc as the new Censor of Caeruleus."

"What?" said Antony and Atticus in unison.

Julius rolled his eyes and cleared his throat. "The. Senate. Has. Chosen. Atticus. Permisc."

For Atticus the world just stopped. He and every other living thing on the face of the planet held in their breaths and heartbeats.

He had won?!

How?

The sheer amount of contradiction in that moment was unpalatable. There was a break in the facts. How could he have done so terribly, been so ridiculed, and still have been chosen for such a prestigious position? Had all the other candidates talked about government corruption?

Atticus soon realized that the world had not in fact stopped, and that Julius was now in front of him, outstretching a hand.



Breaking out of his daze he jumped to his feet, and shook that big sweaty hand as if it was the most fascinating hand that had ever made his acquaintance.

“Congratulations,” Julius said unemotionally. “The Senate would like to have a few words with you before you leave. Everyone else is now dismissed.”

Shakily, Atticus stood up and followed the Praetor back to the Senate Floor. The Legionnaires and Sailors sighed, and Antony found it was his turn to stare blankly into space.

“I-I’m the Censor?” whispered Atticus, as Julius ushered him on.

“Not as much as you think you are,” the Praetor replied, reentering the now mostly empty Senate Floor.

“What?”

Julius didn’t say anything to that, only making his way back to his seat and plopping back down with his cigar.

Atticus took his place back at the podium, where he realized he had left his note cards.

Pliny and Tarquin were there waiting for him, sitting at the table of leadership.

“Hello again, young Mr. Permisc,” said Pliny.

“H-hi.”

“As of this moment,” began Tarquin, “you are probably wondering why you have been chosen to be the Censor. Because, despite your impressive track record in court cases, you are indefensibly incompetent in nearly every other aspect of your life, so testified every one of your teachers we interviewed, Tribune Cornelius whom you interned under, and yourself just a couple minutes ago.

“You will not be able to carry out the full duties of a Censor. The Senate, as a whole, has determined this. You will slip up. You will fail.



“And with that knowledge, the Senate wishes to extend this agreement. The Senatorial press corps was dismissed for these assessments, so understand that this agreement stays between you and us.” Tarquin paused, and glanced to his fellow Consul who nodded in agreement.

“The work of government and legislation is reserved for the Senate, which today means the deal making of aristocrats and industrialists. It’s high time that the Tribunes, and odorous people like Praetor Germanicus here were excluded from the process,” added Pliny.

“You’re an ass,” said Julius, sending the Consul an irritated look.

“Our point is: if you want to keep this job, the prestige, the money, and the government housing it provides, you must learn to support the Senate in its role, and not interfere on your own behalf, or on the behalf of the Tribunes. And you must also swear not to do anything to alter the balance of power. Otherwise, you will face expulsion, with extreme prejudice.”

“Oh...” said Atticus simply, trying to understand it all.

The Censor’s most important duty was to draft laws for the Tribunes...they were telling him not to do his job?

“Do you agree to this arrangement, Mr. Permisc?”

Atticus looked down, away from the Senator’s gazes. They had chosen him because he was the least suited candidate. If he refused, there was a chance someone more competent could have the part. But also, if he refused, he may lose his one chance of working with Quintus in the Senate Building...

“I agree,” he declared.

Consul Tarquin smiled. “Excellent. I’m sure you know what to do from here. The old Censor will help you with the transition. We’ll expect you at your post in two weeks time. But for now, you are free to go.”



Julius put out his cigar in an ashtray. “Do we have a motion for a recess?”

“We are already in recess, you old buffoon!” exclaimed Pliny.

“Really? Since when?”

Tarquin pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed. “Mr. Permisc I’m sure you can find your way out. Your commission will be sent to you soon, Valé.”

With that, he and Pliny took their leave, exiting through the doors on the far side of the chamber. That just left Praetor Germanicus and Atticus. Eventually, even he was able to summon the strength to get his body mass out of the chair.

“Good luck, kid,” he called to Atticus as he left.

“Thanks,” Atticus whispered, gently picking up his notecards and stuffing them into his pocket.

He looked down at his slow paced feet, waiting for them to lead him away.

As soon as he stepped off the Senate Floor he was violently pushed up against the wall, and grabbed by the collar.

“Antony?” he asked in surprise. His eyes suddenly widened with fear as he realized he and Antony were the only ones still in the hall.

“Atticus Permisc...poor, ignorant, foolish Atticus Permisc,” said Antony, spitting the name out as if it were venom. His face was curled into an animalistic snarl, and his hands shook with rage as they grasped Atticus' shirt. “You...and the Senate, have just stolen something from me. Something tells me they even saw you as weak and pathetic as you actually are, and they chose you because they knew you would be easiest to control.”

Atticus swallowed. “Antony...please let me down.”

“Not before I give you this little promise, *Atticus Permisc!* I will destroy you. I will burn and crush and eviscerate every hope, every friend, and every legacy until everything I see here now has



vanished from the face of the world. I swear I'll bring you and everyone in this damn place to their knees! Mark my words!"

Atticus tried to push him away, but Antony simply let him go. He slid down the wall to the ground.

His rival stormed away, leaving Atticus on the floor, alone and confused.



## Chapter Eleven

### A Dangerous Person

The nightstick swung down with a furious whistle. Its black, beaten paint stood out against the sunlit sky. When it slammed down on its target, the flesh rippled as if it was liquid, and the bones cracked as if they were twigs. The gag in the man's mouth kept his pained scream limited to little more than a muffled moan.

Crassus slammed down the weapon again and again while the afternoon sun beat down oppressively, making sweat seep into his shirt.

When he relented, there was one broken arm, four shattered ribs, and a line of blood trickling from the man's gagged mouth.

"You realize you're getting what you deserve, pervert?" he said, pushing the toe of his shoe onto the battered man's throat.

"Is he dead yet?" asked Felicia, bored, and watching as she leaned against the graffitied wall in the Anarchist's meeting place.

"No."

"Good." She walked up to the gagged man who had his hands handcuffed behind his back, and kicked him in the groin. He moaned a higher pitch. "So what are we going to do with this fat bastard anyway? A rapist like him's worse than Praetorians, worse than dirt, really."

Crassus withdrew his knife from its sheath. "Traj said it was up to me. So I thought we'd kill two birds with one stone, and drop whatever's left of him at the door of a Praetorian armory. Send a message: the Burning Fuses can protect the Plebian district better than they ever could."





“Sounds like a plan.” She glanced down at the man as if he were the scum of the earth. But behind her disgust there was neither pity nor satisfaction in her gaze, only the determination of doing a job well done.

They both turned as they heard the concrete door slide open, and another three of their comrades entered the lot.

“How about me and the others take care of this? I bet Traj could use a hand training Claudia,” suggested Felicia.

“You sure?”

“Yeah. I know how you like working with the new ones.”

Crassus smiled gratefully, sheathing his knife.

“Thanks. Remember to carve our symbol and his crime on his chest.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“And don’t forget to remove his entrails and discard the evidence in the river when you’re done.”

“I’m not a child, Crassus.”

“Yeah, yeah,” he replied.

He casually put up his hand in both greeting and farewell as he passed the others on his way out. When he left the mouth of the ally, he held back a shiver and rubbed his hands together for warmth. His sweat had unnecessarily cooled his body in the increasingly cool autumn weather.

A few of the more alert pedestrians noticed his red shirt and its meaning as he walked. But that didn’t worry him: the Plebian District was almost a safe haven for the Burning Fasces. There were enough Anarchists and sympathizers here to make any Praetorian attack a disaster of epic proportions for the purple garbed intruders.

Besides, he had his knife and the ex-Praetorian pistol tucked under his belt if anyone wanted to give him trouble. Just like the pistol’s former owner had.



But according to Traj, if they wanted to win they needed something the Praetorians didn't have for a weapon. Something like Claudia: a magician.

Crassus still had his doubts about the strategy. Magicians were a novelty best left to the E/M district...but he trusted Traj.

Claudia's half-decrepit concrete home was easy to find. There was a small blood symbol over the threshold from the last time he had been there: a crude depiction of a bundle of sticks on fire. It meant that this house was under the protection of the Burning Fuses.

Last time, the doorway and windows had been bare, but he and Traj had installed wooden boards over the window, and a simple plywood door to keep out the wind and prying eyes.

Crassus glanced left and right to ensure he wasn't being followed before he pushed the door in and slid through as casually as he could.

"It's the soft bits that you should aim for if you can, like the throat..." said Traj's voice from above him. The words were quickly followed by loud coughing.

"...good job..." he croaked.

Crassus chuckled to himself, and made his way through Claudia's room. It felt so much warmer now, and that wasn't just because of the broken chair burning in the fireplace.

There was food and a candle on the table, a mattress with a quilt near the fireplace and a small pile of clothes in the corner. It wasn't much, but it was infinitely closer to a home now.

When he, Traj and Claudia had explored the building they found that a portion of the second floor had collapsed onto the first, and the pile of rubble left behind could be used to reach the second story. He guessed that was where they were now.

The first thing he noticed as he made it to the top of the rubble pile were the words inscribed in charcoal on the floor. There were dozens and dozens of them, lined up as if in stanzas



and some crossed out. Carefully, he stepped around them, which was difficult considering they covered nearly every exposed surface.

“Crassus!” exclaimed Traj, from the other side of the room. He lowered his arms from a defensive pose, and Claudia did likewise; pausing their sparing.

She wasn’t wearing her stola like when she first came to the Anarchists; instead she had on a beaten, loose-fitting pair of blue jeans and an off white tunic with a messily painted red stripe on the sleeve. Her red bandanna was tied around her head, and a few strands of her white hair fell out from its confinement, plastered to her forehead with sweat.

“Did you take care of that guy already?”

“Felicia’s finishing up now. How goes the transformation into badass?”

Claudia wiped some of the sweat off her forehead and sat down on the dirty concrete floor. “I feel sore...pretty much everywhere.” She looked up at Traj curiously. “Is that normal?”

“Yeah, you’re doing great champ.”

Claudia smiled, but also experimentally moved her arm back and forth to feel the dull pain.

“Follow up question,” continued Crassus; pointing to the line of words he was standing by. “What’s this?”

“Oh!” Claudia jumped up with pride and excitement. “I had to compose some stories and poems to do a performance in the E/M district. I was really nervous at first. See, I wasn’t quite sure what I was supposed to do. But then I remembered that I’m a street magician, so I thought ‘screw it, just start speaking. It’s not like anyone can fire me.’ So I tried speaking but it came out as a tiny whisper. And then I remembered that I’m an Anarchist and I thought ‘screw it harder, I don’t have to do what I’m supposed to. Especially since I have no idea what that is.’ So I tried speaking louder but then all the words kept jumbling together and I was



messing up so I took a breath and just tried to retell the story right then and there. And the story was about Flamma the Timid, and it made me think of how embarrassed and small I felt right there, and then it all just started working!"

She twirled around in her spot, eyes closed, re-imagining the scene. "There were blue and red lights, and little flames dancing in the air. And it was awesome! When I was done, that candle that's burning downstairs appeared in my hand. I also earned twenty four Sesterces!"

Crassus raised his eyebrows. "That's impressive..."

"But unfortunately, I still haven't figured out how to use this damn yoyo," she said, pulling out the toy from her back pocket. She looked at it with frustration, and tried to twirl it but to no fruition.

"You know, I'd love to see a demonstration," said Crassus.

"What do you say, Claudia?" asked Traj.

She rubbed her yoyo trepidatiously on her arm. "Sure...but I was just wondering. Have you guys asked around to see if anybody knows who I am?"

"Of course," Crassus quickly lied. "But things like this take time. We'll be sure to let you know if we find anything."

Claudia nodded. "When I was out in the E/M district, I kept looking through all the faces in the crowd. Hoping that I would recognize someone, or something, and it would trigger a memory. Or maybe, that someone might recognize me. I know it was a pretty foolish hope. But I couldn't help it."

"We all have foolish hopes. I dreamt of starting a revolt against the government as a kid. So hey! Some dreams do come true," replied Traj brightly. "The Burning Fasces isn't exactly built for finding information like the kind you're looking for, but I think something will come up eventually. In the meantime, how about you show Crassus just what you can do."



Claudia cracked her knuckles and took a deep breath. “I remember lots of stories for some reason. Most of them are about the gods and such. Will the story about Flamma do?”

“Sure,” accepted Crassus, sitting down on a spire that had fallen from the ceiling.

“Well, Flamma was such a tiny thing when he was born. Just a tiny little flame, burning up a single dead leaf. And then it began to rain. The tiny little flame flinched away from the droplets, for they were almost as large as he. As he hid within a hollowed log, he quickly learned to fear the forest and all its creatures.”

Claudia snapped her fingers, and a small flame began to dance above her fingertips.

“The years and years passed and slowly he began to grow. As a child, he scarcely went out to feed himself for fear of all the things in the forest. One day, after a very long rain storm, Flamma went crawling out, nearly starved. He went farther than he ever had before from his empty log and the boulder that sheltered him. He searched through scraps of twigs and damp leaves, so hungry that he barely noticed that he had suddenly come to the banks of a wide river. He tried to hide behind a tree, but Amnis, the goddess of the river had already noticed him. For how could she not notice her earthly kin?”

Claudia closed her eyes and walked forward, every footstep leaving behind a puddle, and water now dripping from the same palm above which the fire swayed back and forth. The fire had grown, almost to the size of the fire in her fireplace. But as the flames licked her skin, she felt neither heat nor pain, for they were just illusions. Just a magic trick...

“‘Hello! Hello!’ she called out eagerly, hoping to meet someone new in the forest. ‘Who are you?’ she asked, walking towards him. Now Amnis was always an adventurous creature, so when Flamma ran the other way, she took it as a challenge.”



She threw up her hand in Crassus direction, and the fire and the stream of water flew towards him. He flinched back. The two forces grew all the larger and danced across the room, dodging around Crassus and Traj and Claudia herself. They chased after each other, the fire as if it was a rabbit, and the water as if it were a wolf.

Claudia, her eyes now opened, realized she had to focus harder if she wanted to make them truly real.

“Chase! Chase! The Ventress eventually cornered the frightened prey. ‘Who are you?’ she asked...’who are you?’ But Flamma did not reply...for as the friendly goddess reached forward her hand began to boil and turn to vapor, and he suddenly became afraid of the answer...”

The fire and water collided, flaring in a bright white light for just a second. A deep, hot steam rolled away from the extinguished elements.

As she inhaled their essence she knew that they were real. With a sigh, she sat back down, crossing her legs.

Traj and Crassus exchanged grinning looks. With a sudden understanding of her great potential, they clapped warmly for the show.

“Sorry...it wasn’t as good as the one I did in the E/M district. I should have tried to do the same retelling...”

“What?! Don’t apologize!” exclaimed Crassus in astonishment. “I’ve never seen a proper magic show like that in...forever.”

Claudia blushed. “There’s a lot of different ways to tell a story. I told this one asking myself the same question Amnis asked Flamma.”

“Well there’s lots of different ways to answer a question like that, now isn’t there? ‘Who are you?’” said Traj. “For example, I know that you are capable of being a dangerous person, with that



gift of yours, Claudia. And very soon, we're all going to learn exactly what that entails."

Claudia looked to him, confused. "Is that good?"

Traj chuckled. "It could be the most fantastic thing in the world. But until we find out for sure, we should keep getting ready. Why don't you go ahead and show Crassus what else you've been working on. I expect large and multiple bruises."

Claudia just flopped boneless onto the concrete floor. "Ahh! But I feel so sore! I swear to all the earthly gods, this can't be natural!"

"Oh, come on. Afterwards we can get something to eat," said Traj.

Crassus perked up at that. "Who's paying?"

Traj looked to Claudia mischievously. "I have a friend who recently came into some money."



## Chapter Twelve

### Antony

The curtains were drawn on the bedroom, and the only thing that served to illuminate the extraordinary disarray in the darkness was the lamp with a recently cracked ceramic base.

The bookshelf was flipped over; its paper residents scattered on the floor. The blankets and sheets that were normally on the bed had been torn and shoved into a dresser drawer.

It was as if a tiny deliberate tornado had carefully picked what to destroy and what to leave alone.

Antony stood in the middle of the room, his chest heaving from the violent episode. His hair was wild from his hands grabbing fistfuls, and his face was still plastered with a look of complete hate.

*“I’m going to kill him,”* was the thought that kept repeating inside Antony’s mind.

“I am going to kill him! That little plebiscite thought he could cheat me!? **I’m going to kill him!**” he seethed out loud this time, accidentally allowing the thought to explode into reality.

But then he paused thoughtfully, and smiled.

“No. That’s right I forgot, I’m not going to kill him. I made a promise I intend to keep. I’m going to destroy him. Both physically and metaphysically,” he thought gleefully to himself. “Grind him up into a pasty powder, and then shred up his soul before putting it on a platter for Mortis to consume. There will be peacocks and celebratory music when I am done.”

He punched the air forcefully, and then kicked it for good measure. “He won’t even know what hit him!”





“But of course...” he glanced to the door, “I have more immediate problems.”

He hadn’t told his father had he lost yet.

This was probably going to hurt a lot, physically. His father wasn’t exactly keen on failure. Neither was Antony, but...

Slowly, Antony sat down on his disheveled bed, his enthusiasm and energy gone. Maybe he deserved it. He had failed. He had allowed the damn plebiscite to succeed, therefore he not only failed himself and the Purpura family; he had failed the entire country.

His father had told him all about the Plebians and their history. How they forced ineptitude on the nation, ended the age of great Caerulean imperialism, and disrupted every industry through strikes.

Antony thought it was disgraceful. They lived in Caeruleus, and it was their job help provide the nation with its steel, its power, its products, just as his job was supposed to be the Censor. They were so ungrateful; they lived in the greatest country ever known and all they could do was protest and complain.

They were just a bunch of petulant children, the Plebians and the Senate. He would fix that. At least he *was* going to fix all that, but now...

He shook his head in frustration and picked up one of his textbooks on the floor and hurled it at the wall. It made a solid thump and dent.

*Knock. Knock. Knock.*

Antony’s eyes widened. A visitor had just arrived into his world of chaos.

He ran his hands through his blue hair, trying to make it look presentable, but it only made it worse. With a sigh, he unlocked the door.

“Come in!” he invited begrudgingly. He didn’t know who would be coming to see him so late.



The door opened.

“Marcus?!” exclaimed Antony in surprise.

The man standing in the doorway was far older than Antony. He had a thick grey and black beard wrapped like a wreath around his neck, with sideburns reaching up from the bottom of his chin to the top of his ear, a new industrialist style. His jet black hair was slicked underneath an equally slick and black top hat, which matched the three-piece suit he wore.

Anyone who didn’t know Marcus would assume he had a special event to attend, but Antony knew better. Marcus always was a businessman in heart and in style. Even after becoming the Tribune of Justice, he never forgot that.

Antony looked at the longtime family friend warily.

“What are you doing here, Marcus?” he asked. He had never come to visit him here before.

“May I come in? It’s rather cold out here,” asked Marcus quietly. His tone confirmed Antony’s suspicion. Something was wrong.

He glanced back to his muddled room, where his possessions were discarded haphazardly on the floor. Hesitantly, he agreed.

Marcus ignored the untidiness. “I heard you had some misfortune today, in the Senate Building.”

Antony nodded flatly. “A minor setback, really.”

“I always admired your ambition, Antony.” Marcus smiled thoughtfully. “Wish I had that drive when I was your age. I would’ve been able to accomplish a lot more than I can now in this damn government. Don’t let anything take that away from you.”

“I won’t.”

Marcus cleared his throat. “It might do well for you to sit down for this.”



He stared at Marcus. But slowly, he complied, taking a seat on the bare mattress.

“Your father and I, you know we were friends for a long time. We went to the Academy together, we even served in the Senate together. And you and I, we’ve gotten along alright in the past. So I thought I should be the one to tell you,” he paused, searching for the right words. “Gravius, your father....well he was a very old man, and his heart, it couldn’t keep up with him anymore. He passed away earlier today.”

Antony stared at Marcus in shock. He hadn’t been expecting that. Sure his father was old, but he wasn’t that old.

“If you need some time, then I understand...”

The imposing figure of his father had always been there in his life. Always looming over him, reminding him of his responsibilities, reprimanding, quite harshly, his failures, and teaching him about the corruption of the world around him. He was the only person that Antony truly feared. But then, that’s what love was about.

He didn’t know what he would do-

No. That wasn’t true. He knew exactly what he had to do. Fate had given him very clear instructions.

Antony shook himself out of the shock as he realized what this meant.

“What about the council seat?”

Marcus paused, looking curiously at him. “I’ve already spoken with the other members. It has been determined you will take his place, as soon as you can.”

Antony nodded. “Are they assembled now?”

“Yes, they are.”

“Then I am ready,” said Antony, standing up, already trying to fix his hair again. “I think I have an ambition that just might make him proud.”



Marcus stood back and watched Antony prepare himself. Slowly a smile spread across his lips. The young boy had a plan.

When Antony was done, and they both went out into the night to attend the meeting, his head filled with his new ambitions now made possible by his seat on the Decemvirate Council .

The Decemvirate Council was a conspiracy like no other. It was the single oldest organization in the country. And arguably, once the most powerful.

Its creation dated back to when Caeruleus City wasn't even a city, just a small farming and fishing town. It predated the senate, the monarchy, even the aristocracy. The Decemvirate Council had created all those things.

Not that anyone would know. Usually, even the council members' families were ignorant to its existence. That wasn't the case for Antony, though. His father had been too proud to keep it a complete secret.

The first, founding members of the council had a vision of a great empire stretching across the globe, with Caeruleus at its center. A very novel idea coming from a village in the middle of nowhere.

It was the Decemvirate Council which propped up the kings of the monarchy, and the crusade towards a great and powerful Caeruleus. But they were eventually foiled by a new and revolutionary Senate which grew far too tired of all the bloodshed and fighting.

The meeting place was at the very center of Caeruleus City. It was nowhere near as grand as the Senate Building, just one floor of strong black granite which had weathered the ages as long as the council. This building, being the center of the City, and also being immeasurably old, was a historical landmark open for tours to the public on weekdays 11 A.M. to 4 P.M., making it ideal for secretive meetings on the weekends.



Antony and Marcus strode boldly into the heart of the building, a room with a circular wooden table and torches casting wild shadows onto the walls. There were ten wooden chairs, eight were filled with rich aristocrats and industrialists who had once been aristocrats. They whispered among themselves about the death of Antony's father, their fellow council member.

Their murmurs ceased when the councilmembers noticed the newcomer. Senator Tarquin stood up to greet him.

"Salveté, Marcus. Antony. We're grateful you could attend this meeting despite tragedy."

Antony smiled as warmly as he could. "Salvé to you as well, Councilman Tarquin. Thank you for your condolences."

"I assume Marcus briefed you on the process of initiation," said Tarquin as he pushed a small, gold ornate box across the table.

Antony nodded as he reached forward and opened the box.

He forced his face to remain devoid of emotion as he took out the crystalline, amethyst dagger. He didn't hesitate to run the edge across his palm, cutting into his skin. The tiny stream of blood fell onto the smooth, dark brown oak of the table. His ancient bloodline renewing its vow to the 9 others. Generations of blood rested on the ancient, round table.

Antony took the handkerchief that Marcus offered him, first using it to clean the dagger and then tying it around his hand to protect the small flesh wound.

"You are now one of the Decemvirate, Antony Purpura. Please take the seat which is rightfully yours," said Tarquin, gesturing to one of the empty chairs.

"It is an honor to be within your ranks," said Antony smiling, taking the seat. "However, Councilman Tarquin, as I accept this position I wish to address the rest of the council."

Tarquin hesitated. He glanced to the others. "Why...of course."



“I may have only been a council member for a few moments as of now. But my father, he always spoke so highly of you all,” Antony lied. His father hated how passive the council had become.

“It’s always been the council’s interests to create a prosperous and powerful Caeruleus. And we succeeded, for a moment in history Caeruleus ruled over all nations which touched the southern ocean. But history is filled with so many what if’s. The age of imperialism began to end after the battle for Surmona Arx. But what if we hadn’t surrendered that fateful day?”

The powerful councilmen all looked at Antony with intrigue, his sentiments were familiar ones to their minds.

“The monarchy came to an end when greedy Senators and ungrateful masses joined together against the king. But what if they had turned against each other?” Antony paused, and leaned forward in his chair, putting his hands down on the table.

“Here’s another ‘what if.’ What if we could reverse all that? What if Caeruleus could be a glorious empire, here and now? I’ve thought long and hard about those questions, and, quite possibly, I might have a way to make that so. We have had our failures in the past. But now is the time for the Decemvirate Council to rise. Now is the time for Caeruleus to rise.”

“What, *exactly*, are you suggesting?” asked councilmember Servius, cautiously.

“I’m suggesting we adopt a new plan. And with it, a new power.”

“I don’t know if you noticed, but this room is filled some of the most influential Senators, Officials, and industrialists in the City. What power could you offer us?” asked Tarquin skeptically.

“Oh not me. The new servant of the council. We need a Paphonian.”

The council was shocked into silence.

Marcus looked at him in surprise. Creating a Paphonian was not something to be taken lightly.



Antony watched as the other council members whispered quietly about his request.

“Are you certain about this?” asked Marcus.

“Yes I am,” replied Antony, confidently.

“Say we create this Paphonian for you. What then?” asked Tarquin.

“Then, I will do my best to advance this plan on behalf of the council. With the Paphonian, we will have a tool to make insurmountable change.”

He laid out, in careful detail, a path to destroy the Senate and seize power for themselves, all while making it appear as though it was the work of unsavory militants such as the Anarchists. His telling was full of deception and lies, but he hid it well.

“Is this request agreed upon?” asked Marcus, already in support of the proposition.

Some of the men were more eager than others, but eventually all agreed.

“It shall be agreed, if Servius shall manage this plan, and our new asset.”

Marcus looked to Antony, to see his reaction. The boy sent the rich factory owner a steely calm gaze, before slowly nodding.

The plan was set, or so the council thought.

“Let us join hands,” declared Marcus, taking Antony’s hand.

By an odd quirk of nature, the bloodlines of the councilmembers’ were all endowed with the power of magic. Something most unusual since magic wasn’t passed down through bloodlines. The reason why was a very old, very dark secret the council had done its best to cover up. Antony didn’t know too much about the story, only that it involved the goddess of truth. None of them were especially skilled, but together they could easily accomplish powerful magical tasks.



All the council members closed their eyes except for Antony. He watched the air shimmer as they chanted the ancient story of the artist, and the lovely statue to whom he fell in love. Each word echoed in the room, and the air grew into a deep, rich and beautiful violet color.

The silhouette of a woman began to form; a dress as violet as the magical light was draped around her.

Antony looked closer and made out black, curly hair, fair skin, a heart shaped face, and eventually her eyes. They were the same lavender as her dress and his magic.

He smiled as the final words rolled off their tongues.

He felt something inside of him stirring; something which he knew was in fact a piece of soul breaking away to be given to the woman.

Suddenly her eyes grew wide, attentive and intelligent, for just a moment. Then she collapsed, asleep, in front of Antony, her maker.

He looked down affectionately at her as he took his hand away from Marcus' and touched her cheek.

"Hello, Virginia," said Antony, having already chosen her name. "Welcome to Caeruleus."





## Chapter Thirteen

### The Tribune of the Plebs

The riots in the third year of king Lucius were caused by mounting disparity between the Senatorial and Plebian classes, the end of the Caerulean sapphire boom, a long drought which drove the cost of bread to two and a half Sesterces per loaf and a scandal about the officials in the Department of Agriculture hoarding grain for themselves.

It was the first time in Caerulean history that the Plebian class spoke with one voice, and that voice was heard.

In response to the riots, the position of the Tribune of the Plebs was created to represent the lower class. Of course, after the first few Tribunes, the position always went to an aristocrat. Someone with a status like Quintus Aurelius'.

Quintus wasn't so concerned with the history as he sat in the blue-striped chair in the hall by the Senate floor, waiting for his time to be assessed. He was more worried about problems closer to home.

"Something's wrong..." he said softly to himself.

He had seen the look of fear and confusion on Atticus' face when he left his assessment. One that didn't make any sense to Quintus after he found out Atticus had been given the position.

"What's wrong?" asked a woman's voice right beside him.

Quintus looked up in surprise. He had been so deep in thought he hadn't noticed her approach.

The woman was of southern descent, with light brown skin, and she wore the same blue tunic as the doorman except lower cut



with the Senatorial crest on it. Her long hair was shiny and well groomed, as if she especially prepared it for today.

He raised an eyebrow, wondering why she cared. "I'm not sure exactly."

She sighed emphatically, sitting down on the armrest of his chair.

Quintus glanced left and right, as if trying to see if this woman had some ulterior motive to approach him. The only other person who seemed to notice the intrusion of his personal space was the red haired doorman who glared at her poisonously.

"Just out of curiosity, what's troubling this noble candidate? A couple pre-assessment jitters?" She slid him a salacious smile.

Quintus blinked. "No. It's about the Senate."

"Well then of course there's something wrong. It's the Senate. You won't find a larger conglomeration of public defecation for another twelve thousand miles in any given direction."

"And you would know!" exclaimed the doorman from across the hall.

The woman stood to face him "Is there something you want to say, Clemens?"

Quintus rolled his eyes, having grown impatient with not understanding the situation. "Who are you?" he asked.

She didn't break her intense gaze. "Flora Magona, Secretary to the Censor."

"Hey! I'm his secretary too!" shouted the doorman.

"Then why are you two in the candidate's hall?" asked Quintus.

"The Censor's secretaries are also supposed to work jointly in the management of the Senate Building, and the National archives. I handle the National Archives part, and Clemens takes care of the Senate Building, which apparently includes being the doorman for assessments."



“I like to go back to my roots sometimes!” replied Clemens indignantly. “And you know what? You’re distracting the candidates with your meretricious ways!”

All the others in the hall were now staring at the exchange.

The woman narrowed her eyes. “I don’t think you know what that word means. Define it.”

He glanced nervously to the side, suddenly looking very insecure about his vocabulary. “Do you know what it means!” he exclaimed, reversing the accusation.

“Of course I do, I was the head librarian of the national archives, once, don’t you recall?” She started sauntering over to him. “I guess you could say I’m a domineering mistress of the written and spoken language.”

Clemens leaned back as she came closer, and whispered the meaning into his ear. He blushed.

“What do you know? I used it correctly, after all.”

“I’m surrounded by children,” muttered Quintus, wondering how either of them landed jobs in the Senate Building.

The door slammed into the doorman’s back, bashing his and the woman’s foreheads together.

“Ow!” they both exclaimed in unison, bringing their hands up to nurse their crowns.

The Legionary candidate exiting the Senate Floor shot them an odd look. They did their best to act casual.

Quintus stood up, knowing it was his turn.

“Why is your forehead so damn hard?” she asked.

“You don’t drink enough milk,” replied Clemens curtly.

The two continued their immature bickering, much to the annoyance of the other candidates, all while Quintus went to face the men of government.

He kept his face neutral as he walked across the Senate Floor, his stride steady and sure. He stopped at the podium, and rested his respectfully clasped hands on its edge.



“Salveté Senators, Consul Tarquin, Consul Pliny, Praetor Germanicus,” he said, his eyes briefly wandering up to the magnificent sapphire ceiling. The deep blue it spread deserved to grace much more important things than the Senators’ dramatics.

Praetor Julius Germanicus began the assessment just like he had for all the other candidates, with a bored monotone and another puff of his cigar.

Unlike Atticus, Quintus didn’t bother with any notecards. He had memorized everything he needed, and was confident in his ability to make things up when necessary.

The Senate began their questions, some inquiring as to his personal history, some to his political stances, some to his record of court cases, and some others still to accuse him of supporting bizarre and fringe political groups.

None of them fazed him. He might not have Atticus’ impassioned power of oratory, but he was never afraid of people questioning him, and that would be quite enough to get him through the day.

It was a tiring exercise, but eventually, after many, many verbal pokes and prods, it seemed to be over. But before the Praetor could dismiss him, the two consuls leaned towards each other and exchanged a few hushed words.

“...and remember, the new grain subsidiaries depend on this,” whispered Tarquin.

“I know! I know!” replied Pliny, irritably.

They both stood up, and Tarquin cleared his throat. It looked like he was about to address Julius, but before he did, almost as an after he looked back to Quintus.

“You wouldn’t happen to be an acquaintance of a fellow named Atticus Permisc, would you?”

Quintus blinked. There was only a couple reasons why they would ask him that. And at the heart of those reasons, they had either done their research or they were trying to ask him a trick



question. Either answer would be a gamble. If he said yes, and they hadn't done their research then they might suddenly fear he would collude with Atticus to undermine their authority. If he said no and it was a rhetorical trap, then he just proved himself untrustworthy.

"...I only heard he was slated to be the new Censor."

If there was one thing he was willing to gamble on it was the ignorance of the country's political leadership.

Tarquin smiled. "Ah! Excellent! In that case I have a motion for an open vote on accepting Quintus Aurelius as the Tribune of the Plebs," he declared.

"I second that motion," added Pliny.

Julius, who been slouching apathetically in his chair up to this point, turned to raise an eyebrow. "You can't. The votes cannot be conducted with the candidate in the room."

Tarquin rolled his eyes. "All in favor?"

He was received with a landslide of "Yes's!"

"All opposed?"

There were a handful of "No's."

Tarquin slammed his hand down on the Consul's desk.

"The vote passes."

Julius blinked. "That's what I'm supposed to say!"

"Of course, you're right in theory, Julius. The normal procedure is for the candidate to only return onto the Senate Floor once the vote has been counted. So I doubt anyone would believe you were actually chosen if that vote wasn't added to the record. Which brings us to the new conditions of your tribuneship. Several things have been changed. Should you accept these changes, you will be the Tribune. Should you not accept them, you will leave with nothing," explained Tarquin.

Quintus didn't like where this was going.

"What changes?" he asked carefully.



“One: you are no longer to deliver petitions to the Senate. Only Senators or Consuls shall have the right to propose legislation from here on out.”

Quintus didn’t bat an eye, nor did he allow himself an instinctive frown.

“And, of course, you will not work to undermine the balance of power in the Senate.”

“On behalf of either side,” added Pliny.

Slowly, Quintus nodded. However, his hands did begin to grip the edge of the podium. The implications were clear. No change in the status quo was to come from his office, no matter how hard the public pressed for it. He was witnessing the neutering of the people’s most direct voice in government.

He began to look to the other Senators. “Am I to assume this information is to be kept a secret?”

Pliny waved his hands dismissively. “Publius is probably going to leak this tomorrow. But nobody likes him anyway.”

An old man jumped up in the stands. “You’re traitors! The lot of you!”

Pliny and Tarquin didn’t spare him a glance.

“So, what do you say? If you take on these slight modifications, the job is yours,” said Tarquin, as if he was offering him the position on a silver platter.

Quintus’ hands tightened their grip on the podium. The light in the Senate room was doused in shadow as a cloud passed over them, blocking the sun sporadically in the sapphire chamber.

He couldn’t let them do this. He had already seen what the Senators and Consuls’ corruption had taken from Caeruleus. There wasn’t anyone left to keep them in check, and remind them of the people’s voices. The Republic he learned in grade school to love and call his own had turned into a dictatorship of one hundred and two men. And they wanted him to be a part of it.



They awaited his answer, not knowing how he gritted his teeth in rage. Slowly, a plan began to form in his mind.

“Mr. Aurelius?” asked Pliny impatiently, as Quintus was looking down mutely.

Instantly, he smiled and shot his eyes back up to them.

“It would be an honor to take this position, Senators, if it is indeed extended to me.”

“Excellent choice, Tribune Aurelius,” said Tarquin. He grinned, pleased with himself and his newly chosen Tribune of the Plebs.

Praetor Germanicus sneered. “You should have gotten out while you had the chance!”



## Chapter Fourteen

### Pomp and Circumstance

The Aurelius house was an old and grand one, as was expected of the old and grand aristocratic families. At first glance it appeared to be made from a glossy, reddish brown gem. But upon closer examination, it could be discovered that the two story house was made from solid sun-sitara stone.

Sun-sitara wasn't really stone, but actually shiny, smooth glass formed from special metals. Whenever the sun hit the house, the golden flecks in the glass would catch the light, and make it shine as bright as the day itself. It was said that the very first Aureliuses were a family of skilled glass blowers, and they built this house as a testament to their craftsmanship.

There was a time when the numerous bedrooms of the house were filled with the Aurelius family children, laughing, playing and growing. But that time had long passed.

Now, Quintus, Serena, and their father Flavius were greeting guests to the feast they were hosting.

Flavius had extended a jovial invitation to everyone of stature, something the crowd on their doorstep was plainly evident of. They entertained the powerful and famous: Consul Tarquin, Consul Pliny, Tribune Marcus Ursacille, and the 'talented' magician Hectus, among many others.

In the biggest hall of the house a table was set. All kinds of delicacies were being brought out: jugs of wine from the finest vineyards, cheeses that had been aged to perfection, nuts, meats, and fruits from across the globe.





There was even a bowl of the best smelling garum Atticus ever smelled, impressive considering the sauce was made from fermented fish innards. But Atticus wasn't paying attention to the preparation of the feast, even as he stared at the smoked Peacock put down in front of him.

"Perk up, this is supposed to be a party," said Serena as she and Quintus came to join him.

"Hmm? Sorry, I was just thinking," he said.

"About what?" she asked.

"The impending collapse of our solar system's sun in 13.5 billion years."

"Thanks for reminding me," replied Quintus as he sat down. "But anyway, there was something I wanted to I wanted to talk to you about."

"Good, there was something I needed to tell you guys too."

Quintus opened his mouth to explain his experience in the Senate, and the strategy he had been planning, but before he could begin, three old men plopped down in the seats around them. Pliny, Tarquin, and Marcus. The two Consuls and the Tribune of Justice.

Quintus frowned, and immediately shifted his gaze so that he was staring stiffly ahead.

"So what was it? What you wanted to talk about?" asked Atticus, confused.

"Later," he said quietly, trying to not draw attention to them. The buzzards had come to inspect the kill.

"Good evening, Pliny," said Tarquin with distaste, less a formal greeting, and more a thinly veiled threat.

"Tarquin! What a coincidence to see you sitting here. Need I be wary of what's in my drink tonight?"

Tarquin smiled bitterly. "Left the hemlock at home, unfortunately."



Any further malicious action between the two was put on hold as a booming voice echoed down from the end of the table.

“Thank you everyone for coming tonight!” Flavius Aurelius stood up at the head of the table, his wine glass raised.

“It’s too often that we are pessimistic and depressed about the state of the Republic. We see our world in degrees of disrepair. We see our weak, our sick, our homeless, our corrupt,” he paused to look to the two Consuls, “and we despair. As we should. But with all this gloom we forget that there is truly always a reason to celebrate. So I give you these few reasons to enjoy yourselves tonight. Celebrate the emergence of what will surely become a *great Tribune*, and a *great Censor*, and a *great Blue Cap*. These three people sitting at this table with us bring new hope and light to our world. May my son and daughter carry the golden-hearted lineage into a new era.” He gave the three young ones a fond gaze before shouting. “Let us eat!”

Tarquin and Pliny looked peeved at the mention of corruption by the former Senator, but they had no qualms about taking their host’s food. It wasn’t long before they started arguing over who should get to serve themselves a slice of peacock first.

The extravagant meal went by with Tarquin and Pliny going at each other, for *almost* the entire time. Their arguments became less and less pronounced as they neared the point where good food conquered all men.

Time went by slowly over the long dinner table; the air was filled with the thick aroma of cooked meat and spices. Quintus and Serena exchanged words and small talk, but Quintus dared not speak openly in front of the politicians.

He watched as the guests began to fan away from the feast to enjoy the magic and music. But he didn’t make a move until Tarquin and Pliny took their argument away from the table, and Marcus went to speak to Flavius Aurelius.



Quintus let out a sigh of relief. “Oh thank Vita! I thought they’d never leave.” He scooted in his chair towards Atticus.

“As I was about to say earlier, there’s something rotten on the Capital and I think we’re in a position to do something about it.”

Atticus nodded distractedly, something else obviously on his mind. “Agreed...but you might be without my help until I get back.”

“Get back from where?”

“I’m going to go visit my parents.”

“In Silva Boreas?” he asked in disbelief.

“I’ve got two weeks until I have to report for my duties, I should only be there for three days or so. And...I haven’t told them I got the job yet.”

“Why?” asked Quintus. It was great news, and a great honor, especially to people who didn’t know the politics of it like Atticus’ parents.

“Well, it’s been a couple years since I’ve seen them. And I thought that it would be nice if I was the one to tell them.” He swallowed and looked down.

“You sure you’re ready for this?” asked Quintus.

For a moment, Atticus seemed unsure, but then his face hardened and gained determination. “It’s time. And I have to do this alone.”

Serena, who had previously been concentrating on her own meal, turned her attention to Atticus. “Oh, come on you two. You’re acting like they’re going to kill him and eat him at first sight. They’re your parents, not lions. I’m sure everything is going to go just fine,” she said.

“Yeah...probably...” said Atticus, unconvinced.




“Ah, going up north to see your folks I see. Personally, I would have waited until summer.”



The three turned, surprised to find that Marcus had crept back to his seat unnoticed, and was stroking his beard in thought.

“Oh come now, don’t look so shocked. As the Tribune of Justice I always have my sources,” he said before popping a pear slice into his mouth.

“Such as sitting right next to us and eavesdropping?” asked Quintus.



## Chapter Fifteen

### People in the Paper

Atticus felt weird without his revolver pressing against the side of his body. He couldn't remember the last time he had gone out at night without it.

He had never used it. And if he was in a panic or attacked, he would probably forget it was even there. But it let him feel safer.

He hadn't brought his revolver with him to the feast at the Aurelius house. So, four hours after they invited him to stay for the night and he accepted, he found himself going out for a late night walk without the cold, familiar, metal contraption.

The frosty air nibbled with sharp teeth at his hands and face. Winter was still a ways off, but it didn't let him forget it was coming.

The chill helped him forget his momentary loss, and remind him of everything that was the same. The walking. The night. The hollow streets. It never seemed to change.

He liked that, especially since everything else was going to change soon.

He didn't like thinking about the censorship, or his upcoming visit, and fortunately for him, his steady walking was enough to leave those thoughts behind. Now it was just him, and the next step forward.

Eventually, he was able to find his way to the Plebian District, just like he always did, and wondered if he should practice some magic for himself. Hopefully he wouldn't fail as spectacularly as he had last time.



He walked around a pile of garbage on the sidewalk, holding his breath for a moment to keep out the putrid smell. When he finally took another breath, he noticed a homeless man sitting against a broken street lamp, his hands tucked under his armpits for warmth. The man stared at Atticus with wide eyes.

“It’s you!” he exclaimed.

“Me?” said Atticus, confused.

“Yes you! The Nocturne Magician!”

Atticus blinked, and suddenly realized where he had seen this man before. He was there when he had done the magic for the little girl in the window.

“Oh yeah. And it’s you!”

The man smiled, revealing his crooked and missing teeth. “There was a reporter fellow asking about you just now, all these questions about the Nocturne Magician. Wish you could have been there to answer them.”

Atticus squatted down to be leveled with him. “Nah, I’m just a regular, amateur magician. He was probably looking for someone else.”

“Nonsense sir, you’re too modest.”

Atticus smiled and shook his head. “I didn’t get your name last time I was here.”

“Corporal Scippio Annunzio, of the fourth cohort. But my friends call me Skippy.”

“You were a legionnaire?”

“I was stationed at a camp by Saxum. Dishonorably discharged for accidentally dropping a full amphora on the Colonel’s head and putting him in the infirmary for a month. No pension.”

“Sorry,” said Atticus, sitting down now beside the broken lamp post and Corporal Skippy. It was rare that he would get an opportunity for amiable conversation on his walks. “Say? Did those sapphire blades of grass ever do you any good?”



“Ah! I still have them,” he reached into the bundle of clothes wrapped around himself, and pulled out a few dried up weeds. “They turned back to normal after you finished your story, not like that girl’s can, but I kept them for good luck.”

“No...it didn’t work?!” exclaimed Atticus, disappointed.

“It’s alright. I hear magic’s unreliable like that.”

“No it’s not alright. I decided that I was going to do some helpful magic for once, and I need to follow through.”

“Don’t bother yourself. I’m no charity case, sir.”

Atticus glanced to the giant garbage pile lying just a little bit off to the side.

“How about a trade, then? A story for a story.”

Corporal Skippy shrugged. “Fair enough. Did you want this old geezer to go first?”

“By all means.”

“I’m not usually one for stories, but I do recall one or two. My cohort had been transferred to the Rubicund border when there were some skirmishes going on. There were one or two actual conflicts, but most of us got out okay. I remember, one night me and few other guys were huddling around a fire on the top of one of those cold, Mintiri damned mountains. Somebody was wondering aloud about why we didn’t just invade instead of having to deal with these embarrassing, inglorious fights around the border. Right about then, our Sergeant walked in, and sat down. I don’t think I will ever forget what he said.

“‘You fellows ever hear about the massacre of a near dozen troops from Camp Invigilis? Happened just a bit south along the border, only about nine years ago.’ We all shook our heads. ‘Well, I was stationed there as a young skinny private when it all went down. Nearly lost my life as well.’

“‘All of the men at the camp were always so prepared to fight, being so close to the border. There had been a few skirmishes like there were now, and everybody’s legs were ready



for pouncing. But no fight came. There was this incessant, tense, lull in the air. Everybody hated it. They wanted that glory you mentioned, son.

“The solution to our boredom came when a few scouts mentioned there were wild boars running in the mountains nearby. One of the officers figured it would boost morale, so he started a hunting contest. Within a week three prize winning boars had been caught, and all the men who caught them gained quite the fame in the camp. But as time went on, sightings of the boars decreased, the kills began to dwindle, until it had been a month since the last boar had been caught.

“A reward was put out if anybody could catch the so called last boar on the mountain. A couple of my buddies and I figured we could be the ones to do just that. So we set out with our guns and binoculars, and tried to find the wild beast. We got lucky that night, and spotted the fattest pig yet! Too bad somebody got a little too antsy, and missed the shot. Scared the thing off. But we weren’t about to give up that easily. So we chased on after it, fast as we could.

“It seemed as though we were after that thing for forever. The only thing we could ever see was its hairy ass, never got close enough to see its face. Eventually, though, it looked like we were tiring it out. Some fellow took aim. That’s when it turned around.

“And instead of a snout, tusks and beady black eyes, it had a soft human face. The bizarre sight stopped us right in our tracks. It started making this loud, chortling shriek. Like laughing.’

“None of us realized that we had crossed into Rubicund territory, so no one was prepared when the sniper fire hit us. My friends were gunned down around me. I took one to my leg, but I could still crawl. Had to crawl all the way back to the border. But before I got away, I saw this tall man, with these empty dark eyes. He had walked over, and started petting the boar. To this day, I know that it could only have been one person.’ He paused right





then, staring eerily into the fire. One brave soldier asked just who it was. ‘It was Mortis. The god of death. And he taught me a lesson that day. We don’t fight for glory. We fight for survival. Either our own, or that of Caeruleus.’”

Corporal Skippy smiled, and leaned back in satisfaction against the lamppost. “Swore I’d never forget that lesson.”

“That’s a good story,” said Atticus. “Strange and somewhat morbid. But good.”

“What do you got for yours, kid?”

“Well since we’re on the topic, how about another one about Mortis? Though, I’m no good with war stories, I’ll just stick to the old mythology.”

“Works for me.”

Atticus pursed his lips and furrowed his brow, wondering which story about Mortis he should choose. After a moment, he wagged his index finger to the street as if addressing an empty audience.

“Vita and Virtus were the youngest of the five immortals. Born to Veritas and Mintiri, they were also the very first humans made from their parent’s design. It is said that the brother and sister lived together in these very Caerulean plains. Though they weren’t called that back then.

“After ten years in their parents’ care, they were abandoned so that Mintiri and Veritas could explore the earth’s lands and make more of the wondrous animals, plants, and mortal humans they had so brilliantly invented. Vita and Virtus’ lives are legends in their own rights, but, simply put, though they had trials and tribulations they loved and cared for one another. Virtus would come to bear her brother’s children, and they started a family in the wide open Caerulean plain.”

The street was transformed into a carpet of grass, the lamppost changed to a young apple tree, and a scene of children playing came to be with their immortal parents watching from the



other side of the street. They were all made of glowing, muted colors; only half there. But they laughed and looked happy together, even if they weren't real.

"Too bad they didn't realize until it was far too late that, unlike her husband, Virtus aged and grew old past her prime. She was but forty-two years old when she fell gravely ill. Vita and all their children gathered around her bedside, trying to comfort her. She told them they had given her a good life, and she told them how she loved them. And by next morning she was dead."

Atticus and Skippy watched as the ghostly forms wept around the body of the goddess, their tears gleaming in moonlight.

"Virtus was the youngest immortal, just moments younger than her brother. But it meant that her body was the closest bound to the forces and ailments of the world. She was the very first thing to die on this Earth. The grief from her absence tore Vita apart. He wailed, and then sunk himself into a deep depression. His grip was relaxed on his element, and life itself began to slip away. Creatures began to die for the first time, and a deep winter surrounded the world."

A cold wind blew between the buildings, turning the grass brown, and tearing the leaves off the apple tree.

"Before that day, Mortis was the simple concept of nothingness. He represented the void, and everything outside of the universe. But, as the world around Vita began to die, Mortis was given sustenance. The souls of the creatures who died were the first things to have ever ceased to exist, and thus Mortis consumed them. They gave him a voice, where before he was known as Mortis the Mute, and made him the god of death. He went to Earth to claim his new dominion."

A tall man with an oily darkness cast over him appeared. He had no face. The darkness grew as more and more of the imagined landscape died.



“Despite his sorrow, Vita soon recognized the danger and tried to take back what was stolen from him. He fought against his new antithesis with all his might, but it was impossible to completely remove Mortis now that he had this foothold. Mortis, irritated by the resistance, attempted to eat Vita himself.”

Atticus and Skippy flinched as the two ghostly gods fought each other hand to hand. The dark figure’s jaw unhinged, and wrapped itself around the other god’s head.

“He bit down into Vita, but he took neither flesh nor soul. Vita’s immortality protected those, but Mortis’ wound had been inflicted upon his mind. Forty years of his memories were consumed. It came to pass that every forty years the process would repeat itself, and his memories would once again be sacrificed to Mortis. Every time, he would wake up believing his precious Virtus was still there, and his hope would be restored only for it to be dashed.

“Ironically enough, Virtus was spared the fate of the other creatures, for while her body was mortal, her soul was not. But none of her further reincarnations would ever call Vita her lover again.”

The ghostly figure of Virtus rematerialized, and she walked away from her confused husband as if she didn’t see him.

“In order to escape Mortis, the children of the immortals lived in honor of the carnal elements of either the Cosmos, the Earth, or Humanity itself so their souls could be connected to something that would last far longer than them. They became hosts to the Cosmic, Earthly and Humane gods and their souls would elude death. As long as there were creatures on Earth, Vita would remain, and as long as they died, Mortis too would stay. Thus, life went on.”

Slowly, the mythic characters disappeared, though the now freshly blossoming landscape kept shining for a little longer.



Atticus glanced up and noticed that the apple tree looked more solid than the other constructs. He ran his hand down its bark and smiled.

“Well would you look at that?” he said. “I think I managed to make something after all.” He jumped up and snatched the biggest apple he could reach from the tree’s ripe branches.

“Much obliged, Sir Magician,” said Skippy, accepting the apple.

“No problem,” replied Atticus.

There was a click, and a flash of light from behind him.

Atticus turned around, only to be caught by a second flash. He blinked. Squiggly lights filled his vision, both the final wisps of his magic drifting away and the afterimage of the camera flash.

Standing there, in the middle of the street, was the man taking the picture. He was a head taller than Atticus, had wide shoulders and an overall imposing figure. His dark black face was covered in the shadow of his Fedora, the word “PRESS” on a piece of paper sticking out the brim, and he wore a thin beige jacket over a white dress shirt.

It took Atticus a moment to figure out what just happened.

“Sorry to surprise you like that, Mr. Magician. But the shot was too good to miss. Say, can I have a brief word with you?” he asked, moving closer.

Atticus panicked. If a newspaper article claimed he was the Nocturne Magician, then the Senate might figure he wasn’t totally incompetent, or even worse, that he had public support behind him. They would fire him in a heartbeat.

“I can’t have my picture or name in the papers, okay,” he said anxiously, taking a step back.

He shrugged. “I gotta have a picture.”

“Then...use the one with my back turned.”

“I only have a few questions. There are some things everybody wants to know about you.”



He took another step back and shook his head.

“Thanks for the story, Corporal,” said Atticus before he started running.

“Hey, wait!” shouted the reporter, starting after him. He slowed to a halt with a sigh after Atticus showed no signs of stopping.



## Chapter Sixteen

### Tros Euxin

**T**ros Euxin didn't look like he belonged in the Plebian District. His clothes were always clean, his hair kept neat, and his face smoothly shaved, all disobeying the unwritten dress code of the laborers' district.

He was not a factory worker, nor a street vendor, nor a servant of the rich as was some of the accustomed professions of his neighbors. Tros Euxin was a reporter; probably the best reporter the Avian Hill Journal had in its arsenal.

His professional writing was consistently paired with the hot-button issues of the hour, more often than not plastered on the front page. Most of his colleagues lived in the Equestrian District. Although a reporter's pay was modest, they had been able to manage the more expensive housing. Unfortunately, Tros had more people to support than his colleagues.

He was lucky, in a sense, to live in a building with a fire-escape: a commodity he refused to spare in a District infamous for its flammable properties. His two room apartment was home to his wife Latona, her parents, his parents, her sister Diana, their two twins Atlanta and Ajax, and himself.

Out of them all, he was the only one with a steady job. Their parents were too old for anything besides knitting hats, and women and children were paid less for any given work, not to mention that the only places with open positions were the dangerous Caerulean factories.

His wife had applied for four different secretary positions last month, and she was rejected for each one. There were so many



people looking for work that employers never had empty positions for long. They could give out whatever wages they wanted, anyone who asked for more was fired, anyone who went on strike and demanded it was also fired. There were always twenty more people waiting in line for their jobs.

It was the system Industrialists used to keep the labor costs low, so effective since a poor job was better than no job. It was a hopeless cycle with the Senate and Praetorian Guards at their side. He wrote far too many painfully neutral articles on the subject not to be depressed by it.

People needed hope in a world like this, if only just a tiny spark to hold onto. Whether that spark be a strong leader or a display of impossible magic to show the world wasn't as abysmal as it seemed. That was what Tros believed.

He sat pensively at the family dinner table.

The two pictures in front of him consumed his undivided attention. He didn't even take his eyes away when his wife sat down beside him. But he did reach out and take her hand that lay tiredly on the table.

She looked curiously at the two pictures. "Are those special?" she asked.

Tros nodded. "I just had them developed. They're for an article I've been working on. Front page stuff." He turned to look at her. "Have you ever heard about this fellow called the Nocturne Magician?"

She had to think for a moment. "Diana might have mentioned something."

Tros tapped his index finger on one of the photographs. "Apparently there is a man, a magician, who walks around the Plebian District at night, doing magic. It was incredible how many people I talked to knew about him. A few even said they saw him. They said it was the most amazing thing they had ever seen."



Tros withdrew a notebook from his jacket pocket. “It was, quote, ‘like a songbird spoke a poem into an exploding rainbow’ end quote.”

Latona snorted. “What’s more amazing is that there’s someone brave enough to walk out there at night with a load of flashing lights around him.”

“People seemed so inspired,” continued Tros, putting down the notebook and leaning back in his chair. “He gave them hope that there might be some color in this grey old place.”

Tros stared contemplatively at the pictures, unsure of which one to use. The first one had the better composition and the magician’s face. The second picture was of his back.

In both photographs ribbons of color were flying across the picture: the after image of a spectacle.

“Just looks like a tired kid to me,” said Latona as she stood back up.

She sighed as she put her hands on her hips and arched her back, trying to work out a kink. “I think I’ll retire. It’s past midnight.”

“Night,” said Tros absentmindedly, still staring at the two photos.

He heard the door to the bedroom close.

Suddenly, he began to smile as a new idea flickered inside him.

“People need hope. Or more specifically, a symbol of hope. What they don’t need is a sleep deprived little boy,” said Tros to himself.

He picked up the picture of the tall Nocturne Magician turned away from the camera.





## Chapter Seventeen

### In Which All Is Fair

She walked bold, looked confident, and smiled threateningly. All three aspects of the stride had been practiced for a full hour ahead of time. She wanted everything to go exactly according to plan. Every other part of her mission was contingent on success here.

On the outside, Virginia was as unstoppable as a locomotive. But on the inside, she was anxious over the odds of failure, and irritated over how itchy the Plebian clothes felt.

She rounded the corner of the Plebian District street, and instantly spotted the two Praetorian Guards. Right where they were supposed to be. Each had a nervous hand on their nightsticks. One had the sleeves of his purple uniform rolled up, and the other had thick, brown side burns.

It wasn't often Praetorians were sent to patrol the Plebian District, but these two were there upon direct orders from the Tribune of Justice Marcus Ursacille. Virginia also knew they hadn't been given orders to leave her unharmed. Hopefully that wouldn't matter.

Their paths were set to collide.

The two Guards talked uneasily with each other, not noticing her until she pushed her way in between them, seemingly trying to get past them.

"Hey!" said the one with the rolled up sleeves, grabbing her by the shoulder. "Show some respect!"

She pretended to think about it.



“Nah,” she replied nonchalantly, even though a rush of giddiness flowed through her as the guard took the bait.

She took the hand grasping her shoulder and twisted it off; her other fist hitting him squarely on the chin.

He reeled back, but not quick enough to escape. She grabbed both sides of his head and smashed it down on her raised knee. As he fell to the ground, she braced herself for the second attack.

The guard with the sideburns overcame his initial surprise quickly.

He swung down his nightstick, but Virginia dodged to the left, the whoosh of displaced air blowing a few curly hairs out of place.

He swung it sideways, and she tried to block with her forearm. The blow sent her tumbling back a few steps, unbalanced and arm stinging.

The first guard, having finally gotten up, wrapped his hands around her from behind, pinning her arms to her waist.

She tried to kick her way out, but the one with the sideburns was standing over her now, his weapon raised higher than before.

***BANG!!***

A red spot started growing on the guard’s uniform. He paused, his nightstick dropping to the ground just before he did, the bullet having done its work.

There was a decisive whack on the guard’s head behind her and he too collapsed to join his comrade on the ground.

Virginia stretched her now free arms, and took a moment to regain her breath before she turned around. Standing there, stuffing his revolver into the back of his pants was her foolish savior. Trajan Catulli: leader of the Burning Fasces. Right on time.

“Thanks,” she said, her smile coming back as she flipped her hair. “But I could have handled these idiots on my own.”



Traj smiled back. “Oh, I’m sure. I just like to help out a new friend in need.”

She let out a mental sigh of relief. It had worked.

It had taken over a week of following this loser around to catch him right here. His schedule and movements were often erratic, but every two days he would go to a shadowy alley with a secret door and be in there for a few hours with an indeterminate number of people. He usually took different approaches each time, but he would always go through this street.

Virginia stepped over the slumped Guard. “The name’s Virginia. Who do I have to thank?”

“Call me Traj, Virginia. And you’re pretty lucky; I almost took a different route today.”

“That is lucky,” she said truthfully.

Traj nodded, and turned himself around, beginning to walk the other way. “Anyway, gotta go.”

That wasn’t a part of the plan. “Wait!” called Virginia, running to catch up with him. She left the two guards in their agony as people in the buildings nearby stuck their heads out the windows, wondering what had happened. “I think I’ve seen you around. Where you headed?”

“Yeah, I think I’ve seen you too. But you can’t go where I’m going.”

Virginia swallowed, he wasn’t taking any of the paths that would lead to the alleyway. “Why not?” she asked with her best pout.

Traj didn’t bother to look her way as he walked forward with purpose. “Well, for one, I’m going to a warzone.”

“I’d expect nothing less from General Trajan of the Burning Fasces.”

“You know who I am?”

“Once I heard your name it was easy to figure out. Shooting and knocking out a few Praetorian Guards was also a good hint,”



said Virginia, leaving out her detailed, covert stalking of his recent activities.

“Still doesn’t matter, I can’t ask someone I just met to go straight into a battle. If you wanted to fight you should’ve joined the Burning Fases. Things are about to get very rough.”

“I can handle rough. And it’s not like I haven’t thought about joining. Just give me a weapon and I’ll fight.” She probably wouldn’t have a chance like this with Traj again.

He stopped, and sent her a questioning look. “You really want to do this?”

She nodded.

“You really want to do this, knowing that you’ll probably get yourself killed?”

“Come on, I won’t get killed *that* easily.”

Reluctantly, Traj knelt down and took out the knife strapped in a sheath to his shin. “I’m surprised I haven’t heard about you before,” he said, offering her the blade.

“What? Do you know everybody in the District?” she asked, accepting the knife.

“No. Just everybody I might need to know. Everybody who’s dangerous, that is.”

Virginia ignored that, hoping he wouldn’t bring any more attention to her identity. “Hey Traj, if I fight good for you guys, would it be alright if I join the Burning Fases?”

“As long as you survive, I’d be fine with that.”

Virginia turned the knife in her hand so its blade was pressed against her arm, making it as inconspicuous as possible. She kept quiet as they walked now, wondering where they were going.

After many city blocks, they crossed into the Industrial District. The tenant buildings they had passed were replaced by wide, rectangular warehouses and factories made from rusty iron, steel, and dirty glass.



Inside some of the factories there were low, constant sounds of massive machinery rumbling, whirring and exuding the smell of smoke and taste of metal into the air. Thick wires hung above the side of the road, humming with electrical power. There were so many trucks passing through that Traj and Virginia often had to press themselves up against the side of the factories to avoid them. The train station nearby seemed ever busy with cargo rattling on the lines, always pumping more resources and materials into the Industrial District, letting it move at a faster and more furious pace than the rest of the city.

Traj eventually stopped in the yard of a steel mill, where others from the Burning Fases were assembling.

Two of them stood closer to the mill than the rest, speaking to a man in a blue collared shirt, with the shadow of a beard, and bitter eyes. Traj approached them with Virginia trailing behind.

“Hi Dad, I hope Crassus and Felicia filled you in by now about why we’re here,” said Traj, stuffing his hands into his pockets.

His father lowered his gaze coolly. “Trajan, if you would please ask your friends to leave. I have important business to deal with right now.”

Traj shrugged. “Sorry, but we’ve already decided to handle this our way. You should probably exit the premises. Perhaps I can have one of my associates escort you.”

“This factory will soon be under the control of the Burning Fases, Mr. Catulli,” Felicia chimed in.

Instead of yielding to his son’s demands, Mr. Catulli angrily put up three fingers. “Three months! That’s how long it took to organize this strike and put together this labor deal. For the first time we might actually have a chance to settle this in our favor. Two men were burned to death and six others were injured because of the dangerous furnaces in that mill. We have an



opportunity to stop anyone else from getting hurt. You really want to ruin that?!”

“Come on, we both know what’s happening here. The owner’s probably already called in the Praetorian Guard, and he’ll have you thrown in jail just like every other time. I’m doing you a favor here. There’s no way the owner will give in to a strike, and even if he does it’ll just be a temporary solution. Personally, I would have preferred to just burn this place down. But hey, I’m willing to help out family when I can.”

Mr. Catulli shook his head. “This violence isn’t going to help anyone. It will only sow more destruction and despair.”

“Ah, but every proper revolution needs a few strong people to eat up the individuals and institutions that hold society back.”

Traj paused as the sound of sirens began to wail in the distance. “I think that would be by the Praetorian Guard, coming to fight on behalf of our industrialist overlords. Felicia, take Mr. Felix Catulli to the safe-house. You and Agatha are to guard it until further notice. If any Praetorians get within 100 yards of the place, shoot them.”

Felicia took him by the shoulder and started guiding him away. “Sorry about this, Mr. Catulli. But I’m sure the labor dispute will be resolved by the time you get back.” Reluctantly, Felix complied.

Traj went to face the growing number of Anarchists in the yard.

“Wait, so this all about a labor dispute?” asked Virginia, confused. She looked over the group with red spattered throughout, at least two hundred strong. They all had some kind of weapon. Only about a fourth had guns, the rest had either knives, swords, or some kind of blunt object like a lead pipe or a crowbar. One had a yo-yo. They all looked ready for a fight.

“You’ll see in just a sec,” replied Traj, waving his hand in the air to get his comrades’ attention.



“Alright everybody! It looks like our moment of truth has finally arrived!” he began. “As I’m sure you can all hear, Praetorian forces will be here soon for their ass-kicking. The pawns of the industrialists will do everything they can to stop us. They won’t go down easy. But they don’t have nearly the same spirit we do either.

“We have surprise and advance planning on our side. Remember your groups. Alpha and Beta group, we’ll need your guns on the roofs on the buildings around us. The owner of the mill should be somewhere in that building behind us, probably with several guards. Gamma group, he’ll be your responsibility. Groups Delta through Zeta will stay in the mill yard and be arranged with Delta group in the front and Zeta group in the back.”

He motioned to Virginia. “This girl is Virginia, I met her on the way here, and she volunteered to fight with us. I am hereby assigning her to group Zero. And I also want to remind everyone that if I’m captured, killed, or incapacitated, Crassus will be in charge of coordinating the Burning Fasces. If things go south, anyone left is to take the wounded back to the safe-house and not look back. Agatha and Felicia will take care of any Praetorians following you.

“The industrialists think that holding us down is easy. That we’ll let them push us around without a fight. But if we take this mill, we can take their power. From here, we will have a foothold in the Industrial District. And once we have the District, there’ll be nothing the industrialists can do to stop us. We show the workers what we can offer them. Freedom, fairness, and an actual chance in life. We use the weapons we capture here to take the other factories and mills. We don’t give up. We don’t yield. We don’t fear.”

He swallowed, all eyes glued on him. “It’ll be hard. And not all of us will survive. But no one will ever be able to forget us: the



Burning Fasces...the idiots from the Plebian District who fought for freedom.”

The red garbed warriors threw their fists into the air. “*For Freedom! For Anarchy!*” they chanted.

General Trajan grinned and tossed his own fist into the air. “*For Freedom! For Anarchy!*”

Virginia joined in for their last rally cry that echoed across the yard. As misguided as the group of miscreants was, she couldn’t help but admire their determination and fire of soul.

The group began to disperse, manning their positions. Traj jogged up to Virginia. “Since you’ve been assigned to group Zero you have just one job: protect her.”

Traj pointed to the girl with the yoyo and red bandanna. “If you fail, then I might just kill you myself.” That was all he said before running off to do his own preparation for the battle.

Virginia looked unsurely to her new protectorate. She was a skinny girl with white hair and no discernable weapon besides her yo-yo. What was so important about her?

The girl spun her yo-yo once, as if to calm her nerves, and then walked over to Virginia. “We have to get to the second floor of that place,” she said, pointing to the storage building on the east side of the yard.

“Alright, we’d better move quick,” said Virginia, the sirens getting louder. They started running towards their defensive position. “Why is it you’re in a group all on your own?” she asked.

“I’ve got a special assignment from Trajan,” she replied. “I just hope I can pull it off. I’ve, well...never really tried it on something this big before.”

“I’m Claudia, by the way,” she said. “Traj picked me up on the way to a meeting too. I’m starting to suspect he’s making a habit out of that.” She smiled nervously as they slipped through the storage building door and shut it behind them.





It was dark, even though there was some light seeping through the small windows. There were crates, and metal cylinders stacked on shelves everywhere.

“No one else is supposed to follow us up here, right?” asked Virginia, pausing in her place.

“No one. Traj said he didn’t want anyone to draw attention to us.”

“Good,” replied Virginia, pushing a shelf filled with cylinders in front of the door.

They forged a path to the other side of the room, and up the steep metal stairs. The second floor was much like the first one except the ceiling was lower.

Claudia let her yoyo drop before flicking her wrist and bringing it back up. She did it a few more times, her eyes closed, before she made her way to the window leading to the front of the mill’s yard. After a bit of fiddling with the latch, she pushed up the window and then stood off to the side, staring out.

Virginia joined her. “So Claudia...are you going to tell me what we’re doing up here?”

“Shhh. I need to concentrate,” she said, her grasp tightening on her yoyo and her breathing now carefully controlled.

Virginia sighed, and turned her attention to the scene outside the window.

Two armored trucks with Praetorian markings on them had pulled up to the edge of the mill’s yard. Virginia carefully took a step back into the shadows as the men started pouring out of the trucks.

Even though she counted the Praetorians among her allies, Virginia had little qualms about letting them walk to their deaths. Certain deaths, considering how stupidly outnumbered these Praetorians were.

Although...she could still hear some sirens approaching in the distance.



The Praetorians had more standard weapons than the Anarchists. Half were armed with black shotguns, the other half had revolvers with wooden handles. All of them had the simple, yet effective night stick strapped to their belts.

One of them near the front had a bright blue stripe on his uniform and an officer's hat. He looked like the one in charge.

Unlike the Praetorians Virginia had encountered in the Plebian District, these ones shined with bravado and confidence.

They marched into the yard, fingers on their gun's triggers, and took stock of the situation.

By then all of the Burning Fasces had taken position and couldn't be seen from the Praetorian's vantage point. They crouched behind stacks of steel rails, and big machines, their weapons ready. All that was needed for the conflict to explode was a single spark...

***BANG!!***

And there it was.

Traj had aimed his revolver straight and true, hitting the Praetorian officer in the side. His retort was the signal the fighters in the other buildings had been waiting for.

Even as the Praetorians unloaded their guns in Traj's direction they were hit by a ferocious volley to the west.

Some were smart enough to duck, and fall to the ground for cover, but not all of them.

As soon as the Praetorians had taken cover to hide from the shooters in the west building they were surprised by the shooters in the east building, further thinning their ranks.

They tried to hide from overhead fire by jumping behind the steel piles and machines, only to be met with a swift strike to the head by the hidden Anarchists with their lead pipes and crowbars.

It was all over in under a minute.



Only a few of the Anarchists in Alpha group had been injured by the Praetorian's random fire. The yard was filled with the pained groans and yells of the bludgeoned and shot guards.

Traj stood up and walked over the Praetorian officer who was doubled over with his blood dripping onto the ground. The officer looked up at Traj with a mixture of anguish, hatred, and animalistic viciousness.

He tried looking for his revolver, but it was out of reach. "Traitorous Bastards!" he yelled.

Traj didn't even break stride as he leveled his gun and let loose another bullet into the man's skull. The guard fell to the ground motionless.

"This isn't over everybody! They'll have backup coming!" he shouted to his soldiers. "Zeta group, get the wounded off the field and into the factory. That includes the Praetorians, use their own cuffs to subdue them Theta group retrieve the Praetorian weapons and get ready to use them. Delta group, with me, we're taking care of the trucks."

Everyone did as he said, and suddenly the battlefield was abuzz with the busy young warriors preparing for the next round. They didn't have time for remorse or fear.

There were still the two drivers in the trucks. One tried to resist, but that didn't last long. The other tried to scramble away, but that didn't last long either.

Traj ordered the trucks to be taken around behind the factory before having everybody resume their positions. Judging by the sirens, reinforcements were almost upon them.

"Well, you were certainly a lot of help," said Virginia sarcastically, smiling in admiration at how easily Traj had dealt with the guards.

Claudia didn't reply. Lowering her eyebrows, Virginia turned to see if there was something wrong.

Claudia was staring over the yard, a glazed look in her eyes.



“You alright?” asked Virginia.

After a second, she snapped out of it.

“Yeah...it’s just...I’ve never seen anybody die before,” there was a poignant bitterness in her throat.

Virginia stopped smiling. “Huh, come to think of it...today would probably be the first time I’ve seen anyone die too.”

“I’d better get started soon,” said Claudia after a moment.

“Traj said there might be as many as four waves coming.”

The last few Anarchists were sprinting into place as the next three Praetorian trucks pulled up. These guards were warier than the last. As soon as they noticed the blood from the drivers’ on the street they raised their guns, and formed a line one the edge of the yard.

They had noticed some of the Anarchists running for cover and weren’t about to fall into the same trap as the last guards.

Their officer gave them the order to fire.

The line of bullets and shotgun pellets bombarded the yard, hitting Anarchists left and right who weren’t completely shielded or taken in the back by ricochets.

Only the Anarchists in Delta and Theta group retaliated with counter-fire.

“Why don’t the shooters on the roofs attack?” asked Virginia as the Anarchist casualties rose.

“Traj’s been planning, preparing and rehearsing the Burning Fases for this battle before I even met him. Since he heard about the labor strike, actually. They were told to wait until Traj’s signal and not to fire a shot before,” replied Claudia.

Eventually, after they unleashed innumerable rounds into the steel yard, and all the visible hostile Anarchists had been incapacitated, the Praetorian Guards reloaded and charged into the yard.

***BANG!!***



There was Traj's signal. Except this time there was some confusion, a few excited gunmen from the wrong side joined in the sniping.

Even though the Guards took some casualties they were able to get cover from shooters on both sides. The core group of Guards was holed up between two stacks of steel rails. Any Anarchists in their sights received a swift wall of lead headed their way.

Unfortunately for the Burning Fasces fighters, four more trucks had just arrived, bristling with angry warriors wearing purple.

Claudia began breathing faster, her palms grew sweaty. It was her time.

"There was a day, not so long ago, where I was witness to the fight of two wild beasts. One was a mighty serpent that slithered among the tall grass. Its girth and length was that of an ancient pine, and its scales shone like river stones in the sunlight, and were just as strong. But it was that serpent's fangs which the most renowned. Sharp enough to slice through iron, and filled with enough venom to poison all the animals in the kingdom," said Claudia, her voice suddenly distant, and beyond all the fighting below her.

"What are you doing?" asked Virginia. The question was answered without a direct response as the floor began to turn to high, green grass, and the shelves turned to tall, old pine trees. An airy wisp slithered through the grasses, and slowly it gained weight, and depth, and shape, becoming the mighty serpent.

It was magic.

"The serpent was feared throughout the land, and all the creatures were under its domain. And the serpent loved its power over all the small ones.

"The other beast was a ferocious quetulan. A frightening sight: scars ran up and down its bark-like skin. It clamored on four



claws with an unearthly speed, and had thin ridges as sharp as knives growing from its forearms. The quetulan had a voracious hunger, and attacked all creatures it saw in a crazed frenzy. Its hunger never went away, and consumed the animal.

“These two beasts of archaic ore encountered one another, as a chance meeting, when I was out hunting one calm morning. At first glance, the serpent was hissing with hatred at this animal that dared defy him, not knowing that the quetulan was servant, slave and citizen to none. And the quetulan was seized with the greatest, mouth-watering hunger from its stomach, and also a fleeting hope that this single, fat meal could quench it. They circled each other, the serpent’s fangs glistening and the quetulan’s stomach rumbling.”

The Anarchists had surrounded the group of Praetorians in the yard, just out of their line of fire, waiting to pounce. But the Praetorians on the perimeter were using the armored trucks for cover and had their guns ready; pointed at the Anarchists who had been thrust from their covers with the last attack.

Crassus was among the Anarchists near the front of the yard, and was barking orders for the others to get down and form a defense. Traj had taken up a lead pipe along with his revolver, and was creeping towards the side of the steel pile that protected the cluster of guards.

Traj pushed the stack of steel over, onto the Praetorians.

The Praetorians on the edge of the yard opened fire.

“They both lunged forward, but the serpent’s fangs found no prey, and the quetulan’s claws found no purchase. The quetulan had been too quick, and the serpent’s scales had been too strong. And yet the quetulan scratched on, trying to break off a scale from its skin, and the serpent squirmed and thrashed trying to crush its prey.”

The yard was thrown into chaos.



Three guards were crushed by the falling pieces of steel; the survivors unleashed every last smithereen of ammo they had left.

Bullets from both Anarchists and Praetorians whizzed through the air.

Trajan braved the storm of flying metal, the last two bullets in his revolver quickly shot through two enemy bodies. He stared them down, his revolver thrown away, only a cold, heavy lead pipe left.

The small group of Praetorians, cut off from their reinforcements, were out of bullets. There were only nine of them still alive, cowering behind what was left of the steel wall.

Traj held up his hand, and instantly, the fire on the group ceased.

He smiled. "Well...what are you waiting for? An invitation?" he asked the guards. They didn't move.

"Go on and help Crassus deal with those other asshats," he called to the other Anarchists. "I've got these guys."

Slowly, they went to do as he said, leaving him all on his own.

"You all are really set on that invitation, aren't you?"

"Shut up!" one of them shouted, leaping forward and using his shotgun as a club.

Traj didn't try to move or evade or trick his attacker. Instead, he heaved his pipe in the same way, his whole body moving behind it.

The two weapons collided, and the shotgun yielded, pure strength overwhelming the guard. With the shotgun out of the way, Traj thrust the pipe forward, against his opponent's chest, knocking the wind out of him. After two more strikes against his head for good measure, Traj turned to the three Praetorians charging at him to avenge their comrade.

His smile grew larger.



The first one was easy. One hit to his hand and he dropped his night stick. Using the momentum from the first hit Traj whirled the pipe around and cracked his skull open, splattering blood everywhere.

A few drops landed across his cheek.

The second guard was just fast enough to hit Traj across the side with his nightstick. Traj winced from the blow, but recovered to strike his elbow out, catching the guard's head.

The last guard tried to tackle him from behind, but Traj side stepped and grabbed him by the neck. With a single, brutal twist and a crack he was done. The guard was dead before he hit the ground.

He didn't even look as he plunged his pipe back, hitting the second guard over the kidney. He collapsed in pain.

Traj staggered to face the last five Praetorians. He was grinning; bloodlust in his eyes.

"Come on..." he taunted. "Come on..."

They hesitated.

"***Come on!!***" he howled.

"The quetulan was the first to spill blood. It dug its claws into the cracks between the scales, and tore one away so that it could bite into reptilian flesh."

The Praetorians finally took the challenge, and ran at Traj with their nightsticks ready.

It was just one strike, a single whirl that had a feral power behind it.

The pipe hit all of the guards in order from left to right, knocking teeth loose, ripping skin open and crushing jaw bones.

None of the five took another step toward him. Traj held out and then dropped his pipe; it clattered to the ground at the same time as the guards.

He threw back his head, extended his arms, and opened his palms to the sky. In that moment, it looked as though he dared the





universe to go up against him, as if he could fight off all the armies in the world and then the world itself and still win.

Unbeknownst to him, one injured guard did dare, and slowly raised his gun towards the mad man.

Crassus stomped down on his hand, and the bullet fired harmlessly to the side. He glared to Traj. "Damn idiot," he muttered.

"But the serpent was not one to go down easily. With a flick of its tail, the quetulan was sent flying."

The Praetorians on the edge of the yard were still fighting feverishly. While some of the Anarchists on the surrounding buildings had managed to pick off a few, none of the forces in the yard had been able to penetrate the line of guards.

More and more Anarchists had to be dragged from the frontline as they were shot. Even the dead were dragged back out of a foolish hope that they could be saved.

Traj and Crassus picked up two new guns and joined the fray.

"Their fighting destroyed everything in their path. They rattled the ground, leveled forests, and crushed any animal stupid enough to stray close to the battle. Neither one could take an advantage without being robbed one, and for every injury they inflicted there was one they soon would receive. Yet, they were both so enraged and strong that neither wound nor danger fazed them. It seemed they were destined to fight on forever, the serpent's fangs just a few inches away from domination, and the quetulan's hunger mere moments away from being satisfied."

The Anarchists held their own against the Praetorians, but it seemed they were hopelessly outgunned as five more trucks stopped in front of the yard. The Guards poured out, and reinforced the line to near impenetrability.

An officer stood up, holding a megaphone to his lips.



“Cease fire!” he shouted. “We will cease fire upon the condition the militant forces will cease fire!”

Slowly, after much shouting behind Praetorian lines, and hesitation behind Anarchist lines, the bullets stopped flying.

“You are hereby notified that the Praetorian Guard is willing to accept your surrender,” said the officer.

His proposal was met with a chant of boos and several loud declarations of “Come and get us you sons of bitches!”

“If you do not submit your surrender now,” he continued through his megaphone, “we will have the authority to take lethal action.”

A few Anarchists laughed. As if the Praetorians cared what they had the authority to do.

Traj stepped up to the front line, blood drying on his smiling face. The Anarchists quieted, knowing he had something to say.

“Hello my enemy!” he called out. “Tell our masters that we are no slaves!”

Crassus leveled his shotgun. “And if our masters ask for proof, tell them blood is our witness!”

“*Blood is our witness! Blood is our witness!*” the others chanted in between hoots and hollers of war.

Claudia swallowed as she watched from her window above the field. But Virginia, she shivered, not out of fear but in awed admiration. She was really beginning to like this Trajan fellow. He was so strong; when he was fighting he was like a force of nature. She suddenly caught herself half-wishing he wouldn’t get slaughtered by the multitude of guns pointed at him. She hadn’t expect herself to get so attached so quickly.

“The rage of the two beasts permeated the world around them, poisoning plants and killing the animals with a violent energy. Eventually the two lovers and gods: Terra, of the earth, and Caelum, of the sky became vexed by the disruption in their



kingdoms. And anything that disrupted the time they spent whispering sweet nothings into each other's ears was something they wouldn't tolerate. They came to the two battling beasts and tore them apart from each other.

"Terra reached into the struggling quetulan's chest and tore out his stomach. After she sewed back his rough skin, he no longer felt hunger. Caelum plucked the serpent's fangs from its mouth, and then plunged its body into the ground. The serpent had no power anymore, and without its fangs it could not eat on its own. Slowly, it began to wither up into a harmless little worm."

A bright silver light enveloped Claudia as she grasped her yoyo with a new, stronger determination. It seemed she knew what she had to do.

The light grew and grew, emanating from the building with such ferocity that it distracted the combatants below from resuming the fight. They looked up in confusion.

"And there was peace. Without fear of the two great beasts, there was peace," she said, her voice inaudible to the warriors bellow, but its effects were unmistakable nonetheless.

The silver light flared with a solar intensity, forcing the Anarchists to shield their eyes. Virginia flinched step back, her eyes shut tight.

When it finally abated, the Anarchists opened their eyes to see the Praetorian Guards lying motionless on the ground. Unconscious, but otherwise unharmed.

"It's over...it's over..." said Claudia, relief flowing through her face as she let herself drop to her knees. "It's over."

"Damn... that was some awesome magic," commented Virginia, peering out over the windows ledge and watching as the Burning Fases began to realize their victory.

"Thanks. That was some awesome protecting on your part," replied Claudia, leaning against a shelf.



Virginia snickered. “You’re welcome. Now come on, I think we’re wanted on the ground.”

She helped Claudia back up, and made for the stairway. “I think I’m going to like you Claudia.”

“Oh, um. That’s good.”

“I just really enjoy being around powerful people,” she continued. “And that was one powerful moment right there.”

The instance that Claudia set foot outside the storage building she was met with a victorious cheer.

Traj walked up to her, smiling a more normal smile. “The Nocturne Magician doesn’t have a thing on you, Claudia!” He put his hands on her shoulders. “I think you just saved the Burning Fuses and defeated the hordes of Praetorians Guards. Today, you truly earned that bandanna!”

The Anarchists cheered again.

Traj tried to turn to address them, but stumbled halfway. Claudia caught him before he fell, and Virginia took a concerned step forward as well. “Sorry...” he said regaining his balance, “that’s just the adrenaline rush wearing off.”

He gave the others an apologetic look.

“Alright...our first priority is getting our wounded out for treatment. I want them all loaded into the trucks and taken to the safe-house. And also...we’re taking the dead with us for a proper burial. They died a good death, and their souls deserve to be put to rest.”

A few Anarchists nodded solemnly; a few others quickly went to work on the new imperative.

“We need all the guards on the perimeter disarmed and handcuffed. Put all the weapons you can’t carry by hand in the trucks.”

He paused, and glanced to the factory behind them as Gamma group finally returned, dragging a short, sweaty man with them.



“About time you guys showed up!” called Traj.

“Sorry Traj, we couldn’t find Servius. But the factory’s manager was hiding under his desk,” said the Anarchist dragging along the disheveled manager. He was tossed before Traj unceremoniously.

Virginia jerked her head with surprise toward the factory.

“Servius,” she whispered. That was the man the Decemvirate had put in charge of Antony’s plot.

“Dammit,” cursed Traj, “he was supposed to be here to negotiate the labor deal with my father. He must have made a run for it once he saw us.”

“Yeah, I thought I saw some guy in a toga going into the factory when I got here,” said Crassus.

Quietly, Virginia slipped away as all the Anarchists scurried around, tending to the wounded and discarded weapons.

She entered the factory through the main entrance, and glanced briefly to the dead bodies lined across the floor. There were over a dozen, all gunshot victims.

Gathered on the other side of the factory were the more numerous wounded. She ignored both as she ventured further.

If Servius was here, she had to find him.

The factory didn’t have any of its lights on, and the light from the windows provided only sporadic illumination. Virginia searched the shadows for any sign of the man of high stature.

The factory was an enormous place, even larger than the yard. All the machines around her were turned off, and their stillness perpetuated a deathly aura around the building.

After walking so far that she could no longer hear the Anarchists at the entrance she began to grow worried that Traj was right, and Servius had escaped.

She hit her forehead with her palm as she realized an obvious solution.



“Servius of the Decemvirate Council, show yourself!” she shouted. Her voice echoed off the metal walls, reaching all the nooks and crannies.

A door creaked opened from somewhere she couldn’t see.

“Who is it?” asked a weary voice.

She rolled her eyes. “Virginia.”

The padding of three pairs of feet crept towards her until Servius and his two private guards walked out from behind a machine with many levers and dials on it.

He immediately brightened at the sight of her. “Virginia! Thank all the immortals you’re here! We should leave before those hooligans find us.”

Virginia smiled thinly, walking up to him. “Unfortunately, I think you might have to stay just a bit longer.”

The guard, though holding a revolver, didn’t raise any defense as she came closer. He wasn’t prepared when she drew her knife and slashed his throat. In the same fluid motion, she grabbed his hand holding the gun, pointed it at the other guard, and fired.

Servius stood there looking wide eyed and dumbfounded. “W-what are you doing?”

“Ah, yes, I guess I have some explaining to do,” said Virginia as she cleaned the blood off her knife with the inside edge of her tunic.

“You see, I don’t work for the Decemvirate Council and I most certainly don’t work for you. My loyalties lie with Antony, just as they rightly should. He’s the real man with the plan, and, I’m sure you’ll see, he’s already outsmarted every last one of you nine lazy asses. The Decemvirate Council has served its purpose. Thank you, by the way, for my conception. But it will soon be dissolved, starting with you. Servius.”

“No...” he said, taking a step back in disbelief.

“My master’s orders were very clear. Servius is to be killed as soon as possible. What a happy coincidence to find you here!”



Servius turned and tried to run, but he was quickly caught and the knife was pressed tightly against his jugular.

“Stop this! You are our Paphonian. You are our-” he was cut off as Virginia pressed her sharp knife just ever so slightly deeper, almost breaking the skin.

“Yes, I am Paphonian. But I’m also so much more. I’m a rather important weapon, so sharp, and so precise that I’ll rip the disgusting bits of this world away, and bring forth the great Caerulean Empire. You see, I’m a weapon of change.”

She grinned, and imagined that this was a power similar to the one Traj had felt when smiting his enemies just minutes ago. She realized she could ask for herself, as she noticed Traj running down the factory floor, a stolen gun in his hand, and Claudia and Crassus on his heels. They had come as soon as they heard the shot, probably suspecting a few Praetorian elements had survived.

They slowed down when they realized Virginia had the situation under control.

“Hey General Trajan! You won’t be needing this guy for anything, will you?” she asked.

He smirked. “Nothing in the slightest.”

She pulled the blade across, and then let him fall.

Claudia flinched, but she was the only one to react.

“You might just make for a good Burning Fascaes yet, Virginia,” said Traj, as she stepped over the crumpled body.

“Thanks.”

She didn’t stop smiling as an overwhelming sense of accomplishment pulsed through her, burying any dirtiness the assassination may have left.

In just one day she had infiltrated the most dangerous militant group in the Country, witnessed their full military capabilities, and taken care of Servius.

*“Antony will be so proud!”* she thought to herself.



## Chapter Eighteen

### The Ruckus from the Pit

Doubt was the most debilitating emotion Claudia knew. Granted, there may have been some emotions she was forgetting, but in the few weeks of life she could remember, nothing, not even fear, had her like this before.

Fear would pass, either in death or in life, but it still would pass. She did not fear fear.

Doubt was much scarier. It was one of those emotions that was like a heavy liquid. It seeped into every crack in her mind, slathered up every thought with its sickly viscosity, weighing her down.

She sat in the back of a cramped, stolen Praetorian truck, stuck in between stacks of shotguns and nightsticks, and the riveted metal wall. Her knees and legs were tucked close to her body; her arms wrapped around them. The almost fetal position was a feeble attempt to make her feel more secure. She wasn't sure if it was working.

Virginia was sitting across from her, playing with her knife: tossing it up and trying to catch it by the hilt. Probably not the smartest thing to be doing in the back of a moving vehicle, but it's what she was doing nonetheless.

They were the only two passengers in the back.

"Hey, Virginia," began Claudia after they hit a bump in the road and her fellow Anarchist fumbled the knife off to the side. "Have you ever done something you thought was wrong after you did it, and come to really regret it?"





She tilted her head in thought. “I dropped a ceramic plate once.”

“No, like something really important.”

“Nope.”

Claudia sighed.

“What? Don’t tell me you’re regretting stopping the Praetorians?” said Virginia in disbelief.

“No, it’s not that,” replied Claudia.

Her doubt stemmed from something far more important.

When she had watched the battle from far above, something changed inside her. All that blood, all that rage, all that death. It was something she had never really understood before.

She knew that’s just what happened in a war. But she hadn’t understood.

The Burning Fasces was a group of people who tore the life out of others. They were highly organized murderers, just like the Praetorians Guards. The only differences were in resources and ideology.

“*Maybe...I don’t belong with them...*” Claudia thought softly.

That was her doubt.

Was their ideology her ideology? She didn’t know. Freedom was quite nice, and so was the idea of anarchy. But then, only Traj and Crassus told her any truths about the world and those noble concepts.

She didn’t act the way they acted. She hadn’t realized this before, but now it was clear. From the very first meeting on she didn’t have the same fierceness, or punkness of the others. She wasn’t loud, or strong, or colorful, or angry. She was just there, naively listening to their bitter comments about the Praetorians, industrialists, and the government.

But the Burning Fasces was the only place she ever belonged to, as far as she could remember. Her only friends were here. And



yes, they were her friends. She had laughed, and talked, and smiled, and lived happily alongside Traj, Crassus, Felicia and now Virginia. They had been kind to her, and she believed that she had returned that kindness.

She pulled her yoyo before her eyes and studied it, as if it held the answer in its wooden groove.

The answer, she already knew, was not in the yoyo, but in herself. And that was the problem.

The truck stopped, and its inertia sent Claudia and Virginia sliding into the stack of shotguns and nightsticks.

“Finally!” exclaimed Virginia, getting up and dusting off her pants. “Where was it Traj said he was taking us?”

Claudia glanced up distractedly. “The Pit.”

The Pit was the second most popular place the Anarchists liked to hang out at. It didn’t really need another name.

It was a wound on the face of the earth, two miles wide and nearly half a mile deep. It was on the very outskirts of Caeruleus city, past the fields of grave stones. At one point it had just been one of the numerous quarries in the area, used to plunder valuable minerals from the ground.

There were twenty levels of terraces descending to its center, and a flat, earth ramp leading down. At certain levels there were deep, man-made caves.

The trucks had stopped at the very bottom, and everyone was jumping out. Virginia unlatched the back doors to reveal the rocky landscape.

Claudia stuffed her yoyo into her pocket and helped unload the weapons before all the trucks were driven into separate caves so they wouldn’t be seen from any external inspection.

Then the alcohol came out.

Most Caeruleans drank wine poured from a large amphora when they were at home, which was then diluted to varying amounts with water depending on the drinker’s tastes and age.



However, the preferred drink of the Burning Fasces, and many Caeruleans away from home, was bottled Rubicund beer. Which was precisely what the Anarchists retrieved from the innumerable nooks, and crannies of the pit. There was so much beer hidden throughout the quarry that someone sitting down in any given location could just sift their hand through the fine first layer of dirt and find a full bottle.

After unloading the truck, Claudia sat down on the edge of a terrace and did just that. In less than six seconds she was prying at a bottle cap.

It took the first two weeks of her time with the Burning Fasces to get used to the drink, which unlike Caerulean wine, was never diluted. She wondered briefly what she had eaten and drunk before joining the Anarchists. It must have been very different considering how alien everything tasted at first.

Virginia joined her on the earthen seat and copied Claudia's search methods.

Being so far beneath surface level, they couldn't see the sun setting in the distance, but the purple and pinkish stains were still there as twilight set in.

"That was pretty clever," said Virginia, opening her own bottle. "Using magic as a weapon. I've never seen anybody do that before."

"It was Traj's idea," she replied. "Normally, I just perform on the street in the E/M District."

"Is that what you've always done?" Virginia asked.

She looked down and shrugged. "I don't know."

Virginia sent her an amused look. "What do you mean you don't know?"

"It means I don't know."

Virginia waited patiently for an actual answer.

Claudia sighed and told her how she had woken up in the abandoned building, without any previous memories, and how she



joined the Burning Fasces in the hope that the Anarchists might be able to either help her get back her memories or find someone from the life she had forgotten.

“...they haven’t found anything yet. But then, I don’t even know if they’re trying.”

“Have you asked them?”

“I don’t really know too many of the Anarchist well besides Traj, Crassus, and his sister.”

“They why are you with them?”

“Because Traj, Crassus and Felicia are my friends. And...I don’t know where else I would go.” She took a sip of her drink sullenly.

“Yeah. That sounds like it sucks.” Virginia looked down at her bottle, and then knocked back some. She coughed at her first attempt to swallow. Claudia glanced at her curiously; she didn’t expect her to have never drunk the stuff before.

Crassus jogged up to them. “Hey, we found some Praetorian uniforms in one of the trucks. A few of the others are using them as the target of a knife throwing contest, did you two want to try a hand at it?”

Virginia jumped off the edge and back to her feet, holding up her knife. “Now that sounds like fun.”

“How about you Claudia?”

“Maybe later.”

“Fine, but the first round is always the most exciting. That’s when all the injuries happen,” he replied brightly, showing Virginia the way.

Claudia watched the others in the Pit celebrating. Even though several of the Anarchists had died, the day had been won. As far as she knew, there had never been a battle or victory this big for the Burning Fasces before.



As she sat wrapped up in her solitude, several of the Anarchists came up to her, and thanked and commended her for her last minute heroics that saved their lives.

She took them all with as much grace as she could manage: a smile, a ‘thanks,’ and a mention about how she was just doing her part.

After a while, Crassus returned and sat next to her.

“Back so soon?” she asked.

“Yeah, lost after the second round. Virginia seems to have a knack for it though. She’s really getting along well with Traj.”

She looked over to the knife throwers. She saw that Traj had taken it upon himself to teach Virginia the proper technique involved, showing her the right stance, and tapped her wrist and arm in several places to adjust her aim. Virginia smiled and nodded in appreciation.

Her throw, while not perfect, hit the target.

“Yeah, she is.”

“He’s always the one to get the girl,” commented Crassus.

Claudia put down her bottle. “Can I ask you a question?”

“If you’d like.”

“...how did the Burning Fasces begin?”

“Ohhh, now that is a story,” said Crassus. He smiled, reminiscing. “It must have been four or five years ago when it all changed. Caeruleus City was a much different place back then. The Praetorian Guard wasn’t nearly as big as it is today, and there were groups, a lot like ours in some ways. Gangs that controlled different parts of the Plebian District; most of them hated each other.

“Things were pretty chaotic back then. Traj and Felicia and I weren’t mixed up in all that, if you can believe it. Tough people like us were in high demand, and the three of us worked for a courier service, getting important packages from point A to point B without the content getting stolen by the gangs. It was around



that time the gangs started spilling into the Equestrian and E/M Districts. And when they expanded, so did our services.

“Traj and I were good friends, even then, and I got to know his family pretty well. He had a sister. Tiny little thing, her name was Andromeda. Even though our gig paid pretty well, it wasn’t quite enough to support his family since his mom was sick, and his dad’s job at a matchstick factory didn’t pay much. So his little sis had to take up a job in a textile factory.”

Crassus paused, and sighed. “Andromeda’s job was simple. All she had to do was replace the spindles of thread. The thing was that the spindles were always put on racks above the machines. They weighed five pounds each, and she was given this rickety wooden ladder to climb up to them. If she fell down, then it was one mess of blood that they’d have to clean up. Of course, when it did happen, and she died, they only cleaned the blood off the machine. It was still in puddles on the floor when Traj and I got there, and there were people stepping in it, still putting together those damn clothes with a distant look in their eyes.

“Today, you probably saw Traj in a proper rage for the first time. A real, murderous rage.”

Claudia nodded. “It was...scary.”

“Well it was nothing compared to that look on his face that day. Sure there was sorrow. But Traj was never the kind of guy who gets down, he’s the kind of guy who gets even. I tried to calm him down, make sure he didn’t do anything stupid. I just...wanted him to grieve properly, and then let her go. I didn’t want to see this consume him.

“Not even a week later every newspaper in the country had the same story on the front page. ‘Senator and Industrialist Lucretius Hanged under Bridge.’ The factory owner’s body had been gutted and was still dripping with blood when he was found. The thread around his neck was the same kind he used in his



factories. There was a particularly famous photograph of it, taken by some fellow named Tros Euxin.

“Traj’s father reacted to the loss of his daughter a bit differently. He quit his job, and devoted his life to trying to organize unions and strikes to improve working conditions in factories. Traj’s mom died later that year.

“As much as I felt sorry for Traj because of what happened, I was pretty pissed too. A seven digit reward was put out for the guy who killed the Senator. I don’t know how they started, but there were some rumors that were a scarily accurate about who did it. Soon enough every gang of rejects in the city was after him. I think I was the only one who stuck with him in those days. His dad pretty much disowned him after he found out what he did.

“It was just me and him versus the world.”

Claudia blinked. “Why did you stick by him?”

“He’s my best friend. I didn’t want to see him die over doing the world a favor.”

“That’s pretty noble of you.”

“Nah, it was pretty stupid. After our tenth street fight in a month Traj looked like he was just about ready to give up and let the next thug take him out. That didn’t sit well with me. So I sat him down and I told him. ‘You started all this Traj. You might not think so, but you have the power to end it too. And you’d better end it, because you can take vengeance on behalf of your sister all you want, you can even drag me into it. But you can’t let people like my sister and your dad be put in danger because of it, and that’s exactly where this is headed.’

“Now, before I continue, I should probably tell you about this secondhand bookstore in the Equestrian District that hired us out more than a couple times to deliver some particularly valuable books to their buyers. Myself, I’m not too good with reading and I’d much prefer to have a harmonica, but Traj has a better appreciation of books than I do.”



“I didn’t know you played the harmonica.”

“When I did the whole currier thing I had a band on the side with Felicia singing and this guy with a hair-lip playing a lyre. We got paid for some shows in a bar in the E/M District.”

“You’ll have to show me sometime.”

He nodded. “Anyway, Traj got some nice discarded books, and one of them was a history about the Caerulean Revolution. That got him fascinated about this figure named Pilleus Aurelius, one of the leaders of the revolution and one of the founders of the Anarchist school of thought. The guy wanted the state and the elites to die with the monarchy. I wish he’d succeeded, would have saved us an awful lot of work. Traj took a lot of inspiration from him.

“That’s how he became an Anarchist. But it was only after I gave my little speech that he came up with the idea of the Burning Fases. There were already so many people willing to fight; if he could just unite them he could bring a second revolution. The Praetorians, industrialists, and the gangs would finally be done for, if he could just do that.

“Of course, the murder of a Senator is naturally a big deal. The incident launched a massive overhaul of the Praetorian Guard, starting when Marcus Ursacille was put into power. An industrialist who, by all accounts, was a firm believer that quantity and not quality was the way to go. Within one year of becoming Tribune, the Praetorian Guard almost tripled in size. His first initiative was wiping out the gangs in the Plebian District. A very convenient endeavor for us, since all the gang leaders were rounded up and executed.

“Traj, Felicia and I started recruiting people we felt we could trust. Traj’s infamy as the Senator’s killer helped us get more and more people on our side when we opened ourselves to people from the broken gangs. And just around then, the Tribune of Justice’s strategy started falling apart. Sure the Praetorian Guards





were corrupt before, but it got worse after the expansions. Half the businesses in town were being extorted by them, and they were all a bunch of bullies to begin with. So when we started butting their asses out of here, we won the public support too. Turned us into a proper pillar of the community.”

“And that’s how it all started?”

“Yup. And it’s either going to end in fire or in glory.”

Claudia took another sip of her drink; she wasn’t sure if those two endings were all that different.

“Hey Crassus!” called Traj. He and Virginia had jumped to a higher terrace, and the Anarchists were gathering around them.

“Can you get us the red paint?!”

Crassus saluted playfully and went to find where they had hidden the paint can. Claudia curiously joined the crowd in front of Traj and Virginia.

Unsurprisingly, everybody smelled like beer and gunpowder. She began breathing through her mouth.

“We all know that today’s events are only the beginning of our long campaign,” said Traj, reminding everyone of the master plan. “In the coming days and weeks we will have to prepare ourselves. But we also shouldn’t forget to open our arms to those who can help us. So what do you say guys? Do we embrace Virginia as one of the Burning Fases? The girl who protected our secret weapon and hunted down Servius the Industrialist!”

He was answered with an unanimous affirmation of, “Yeah!” and, “Sure, why not.”

Crassus jumped up to their terrace, the crimson paint in hand.

“Virginia, will you fight and defend your fellow Plebs and Burning Fases against those who wish to harm and subjugate us?”

“Yes!”

“And will you uphold the creed and spirit of the Burning Fases? Will you be fearless?”



“I will!”

Traj dipped his palm into the paint can, and smeared the color across her sleeve. A small glob of paint dripped onto Virginia’s fingers. With a grin, she streaked the paint across Traj’s cheek.

The Anarchists laughed and cheered, and so did Claudia.

The night quickly devolved into a mosh of such laughter, dancing, and fire, the fire being provided by several purple uniforms soaked with alcohol from broken bottles.

Claudia was caught up in the middle of it and the energy of the moment permeated her body. She jumped, and felt the world jump with her. It was all so light, and so fast that for a moment she forget herself and her troubles.

At one point, Virginia had her arm around her shoulder as everyone sang a drunken song. At another, she watched as Traj and Virginia grew closer and closer, until their mouths were smashed together in a kiss. Many an Anarchists ood, and clapped at that.

But eventually, even the chaotic, bountiful fuel that propelled their anarchy ran low.

The only one left awake in the darkest morning hours was Claudia. It wasn’t the first time she had had trouble sleeping. But this time, she hadn’t even tried to rest.

As the celebration had winded down, and the buzz from the beer faded away, the troubles returned to her mind.

She walked by herself on the edge of the pit. On one side was the dark abyss, and on the other, grassy fields.

She mulled over her memories, and her quandaries, searching for what she should do.

“Okay, Claudia. This part is up to you. Things can’t stay the way they are. If they do, then you’ll never find out who you are. You’ll never even now your last name...” She turned, and looked into the depths of the pit, her eyes barely making out the



silhouettes of the Anarchists sleeping on the ground. “But I don’t want to lose them either...”

She sighed, and untied her bandanna. The red cloth had been one of her few constant companions so far. Would she really sacrifice it?

She clutched her fist around it and realized what she had to do.

Steeling herself, she ran back into the pit, down the earthen ramp. She didn’t slow until she reached the bottom, and had to tip-toe in between the slumbering Anarchist bodies.

Sleeping with his back propped up against the stone wall, and with Virginia under his arm her head on his chest, was Traj. He snored loudly as she approached.

Quietly, she bent down over him, and whispered his name.

In an instance he jolted up, whipping a knife out from behind him, confused. He woke up Virginia in the processes.

“Claudia?” he said, once he remembered where he was. “What are you doing? Are there Praetorians coming?”

She shook her head, and pushed his knife down and away from her. “No. There was just something I wanted to tell you.”

He squinted. Virginia reluctantly sat upright.

“Can it wait till morning? I think I’ve got a pretty nasty headache coming on.”

“Listen, Traj. I want you to know that I’m grateful for helping me get to me feet, and adjust after you found me. I really am. But I need to know what you’ve done to find out who I was before.”

“Look, we’ve asked around- ”

“Asked who?”

He hesitated.

“Traj. I need to find that life. Alright? As of now, I’m going to start looking. Anywhere and everywhere. I’ll ask the Praetorians if I have to. I can’t just sit around anymore. Now I can



either do so with you and the Burning Fasces with me, at my back or I can do it on my own. But I don't think you all really wanted me to know, since you haven't done a damn thing towards that goal so far. So this is my ultimatum. Either you give me something concrete, or I'm leaving the Burning Fasces."

She held out her bandanna., waiting for his answer. A conflicted look flashed across his face. After a minute without reply, Claudia dropped the bandanna. She turned and started walking away.

Traj scrambled to his feet. "Wait!" After catching up with her, he pressed the bandanna. back into her hand.

"I might know someone who can help you," he said.

"What's their name?"

He paused, almost as if he didn't want to divulge it.

"...Tonas," he said finally. "Magister Tonas Caesius."



## Chapter Nineteen

### The Great Magister Tonas

Claudia had been to the E/M District many times; usually it was for a street performance to make money. But this time it was different.

She glanced to Traj and Virginia who were walking beside her.

“Are you sure about this?” asked Claudia, rubbing her yoyo against her arm nervously.

“You were the one who wanted me to something,” Traj reminded her.

“Yeah...but I don’t really know this guy. He just feels shady. I was hoping you would take me to a doctor or someone like that.”

He rolled his eyes. “I’m introducing you to a teacher, not a drug dealer.”

“How do you know he’ll be here, anyway?” asked Virginia, her eyes not focused on him but rather the many odd sights, performances, and wares sold on the side of the road.

“Magister Tonas is here every Friday to get pan-fried chicken from the green colored stand on the corner of this street. I’ve spent a couple Friday evenings discussing philosophy with him; usually we’d start on the topic of anarchism.”

“So he was one of the people who inspired the Burning Fasces, I take it,” said Virginia.

Traj scoffed. “Hardly. When I say discussion, I really mean a polite argument. And by polite I mean it usually ends in swearing and physical threats.”

“Are you really *sure* about this?” repeated Claudia.



He didn't reply.

When they reached the end of the street, Traj stopped and opened his arms. "Ladies, may I present the great Magister Tonas Caesius!"

"Huh?" said a confused old man on a bench, turning his attention away from the basket of chicken he was hunched over. "Oh...Trajan, I see you've brought some friends...and you know you don't have to call me Magister. You're not actually my student."

"And you don't have to call me Trajan either, Magister," replied Traj.

Tonas wiped the grease away from his lips, and passed a curious eye over Claudia and Virginia.

"You want something, don't you?" asked Tonas. "*Everybody* seems to want something from this old man," he said, exasperated.

"I assure you this is for something important and morally responsible."

Tonas raised an eyebrow. "Normally, I would ask if there is a girl involved, but you seem to have that end of things covered."

Claudia straightened her shirt indignantly. Virginia just smiled thinly.

"It's about her," said Traj, pointing to Claudia.

He explained everything he knew about Claudia's predicament: her memory loss and waking up in the abandoned building.

Tonas looked at Claudia curiously with his grey green eyes. She felt uneasy under his gaze.

"I'll see what I can do," he said finally. "But why don't you sit down, Claudia."

Claudia took a timid few step forwards, cause enough for Tonas to roll his eyes again. "Come on, I don't bite," he said, motioning with his left hand.



“Thank you for this, Magister Caesius,” she said as courteously as she could manage. She took a seat on the other side of the bench, leaving as much room in between them as she could.

“First of all, you shouldn’t thank me yet; tricky thing about memory is that everybody has too many bad ones. Second of all, my name isn’t Magister Caesius, its Magister Tonas. My brother is Magister Caesius, may the immortals damn his soul and his teaching license.” He shook his head angrily at mentioning his sibling. “But anyway, would you care to elaborate about your little memory problem?”

“They told you pretty much everything.”

“Well, I want to hear it from you.”

Claudia tapped her toe impatiently. “I woke up in an abandoned building wearing a white stola. I couldn’t remember how I got there, or anything that happened before, which was a very disconcerting experience. I met Traj a little after that on the street. I’ve been living in the building I woke up in ever since.” She felt it sounded a bit pathetic like that.

“That’s the reason I’m here, Magister Cae-Tonas. I need my memories back. Either that, or I need to find someone from my old life.”

Tonas nodded. “I might be able to help you. But you should still be careful around Trajan and his company. They aren’t exactly all flowers and fun.”

Traj folded his arms.

“Yeah I know,” said Claudia quietly. She was surprised that he knew they were in the Burning Fases and still entertained their questions. Most people outside of the Plebian District were afraid of them. So were people in the Plebian District, but that was less out of fear of the unknown.

“So, Trajan just named you Claudia or did you know your name? Every detail is important. Did you wake up with any preconceived notions at all?” continued Tonas.



"I knew my name, and I knew how to walk and talk too, if that was your next question...but there were a few other things. I knew I was a magician, and...I was missing something important."

"Interesting." He took a few Sesterces out of his pocket and threw them to Traj.

"Do me a favor, Trajan, and buy that vial with the greyish green stuff in it from the fellow selling apothecary wares."

"Sure," he said. He quickly went over to a stand selling an assortment of herbal remedies and brought back the requested liquid.

"Thank you," said Tonas, uncorking the mixture.

Claudia cringed. It smelled like burnt onions, rotten tomatoes and charcoal.

"Drink this," he said, offering her the vial.

Reluctantly, she took it, eying it cautiously.

"I promise it's safe," he added as she sent him a dubious look. "The smell is deceiving."

She wrinkled her nose and took a swig.

He was right, the smell was deceiving. It tasted about a dozen times worse than it smelled.

She wasn't even able to gulp down a drop before her gag reflex kicked in. With a throaty cough, she expelled the putrid stuff.

"Why did you tell me to drink that?!" she asked as she tried to scrape the bitter taste off her tongue with her hands.

"So you wouldn't trust me," replied Tonas, smiling to himself. "Of all the schools of thoughts in all the world I have found skepticism to be among the most useful. It teaches that the opinions of man have changed so much over the years that it is practically impossible for us to be truly correct, as we will no doubt disprove ourselves in due time. In its very nature it says that we shouldn't trust easily. Not others, not the world, and not ourselves. Any assumption can be false. For example, you cannot





remember anything before waking up in that abandoned building. Perhaps the world didn't exist before then. Maybe all these buildings, roads, people, and their memories were made retroactively."

"That seems unlikely," commented Traj.

"Yes, but what's possible and what's likely are two completely different things."

Claudia had trouble figuring out what he was talking about; she was still busy trying to spit out the last tangs of foul liquid.

"Exactly how are you going to get my memories back? Are you going to hypnotize me?" she asked, once her uvula no longer egged her on to vomit. Neither Tonas nor Traj had explained the process, but that was really only a minor detail to her.

"Hypnotism is for chumps! We'll be using the much more noble art of magic to restore your memories!" he exclaimed, suddenly full of enthusiasm. "But I'm going to need you to be asleep for that part."

He rummaged through his pockets and pulled out a small bottle with a few lonely pills at the bottom. "And just so you know, these things aren't cheap. I use them on the weekends when there isn't the lulling sound of chatting students to help me drift to sleep. And my neighbor's stupid cat going pitter patter on the roof all night long doesn't help matters either! But these usually put me out in a snap."

He offered her a simple, yellow capsule.

She reached out hesitantly.

"We'll be right here," said Virginia, trying to comfort her.

That was exactly what she was worried about.

She knew she had to do this. There was nothing she wanted more than to know who she was.

But what if she had been someone they hated? Someone who associated with Praetorians, Industrialists, Aristocrats, or men of government?



Even worse than that, what if the life she found was one she couldn't live with? Perhaps the reasons no one from her previous life had come looking for her was because they didn't want her, or because they were all dead.

That still didn't matter... she couldn't be ignorant about who she was.

She swallowed the pill.

Tonas cracked his knuckles in preparation. "This shouldn't take too long."

Claudia tried to get comfortable in her seat, and closed her eyes.

The last thing she saw was Traj and Virginia carefully watching over her.

Eventually, the sound of the moving crowd faded away, and time seemed to fade away too in the darkness of her subconscious.

Claudia had once heard from another street performer that the reason people dream was because their minds were so bored of the stillness of sleep that they made fantasies to pass the time.

Claudia's dreams were usually of her "home," with her faceless family. She didn't dream about that this time.

The scene felt so real and yet so distant

She was standing with her back against the wall in her concrete room, in the abandoned building. There was nothing but a murky greyness behind the open door and hollow windows.

She could hear a voice outside but couldn't distinguish the words. The only thing that was clear was the swoosh of a coat and the echo of footsteps walking away from her. She felt herself sliding down the cold wall and the world turned into a fuzzy darkness.

She wanted to curl up and stay inside her warm void forever, but it was not meant to be.



There was a brief moment of weightlessness and then a flash of pain. Her eyes snapped open, and she realized she was on the cobblestone ground.

“Told you that would wake her up!” said Tonas with satisfaction.

Claudia rolled onto her back and craned her neck up to see Tonas still on the bench and the surprised faces of Traj and Virginia.

“Did you just push me onto the ground?” she asked.

“Sorry, but that pill was supposed to put someone as fat as me out for at least five hours. I couldn’t wait that long to give you this prognosis.”

She sat up attentively. “Wait, so you already did the magic?” He nodded.

“How long was I asleep?”

“Just about twenty five minutes,” said Traj.

“You guys made at least seventeen Sesterces from that performance,” said Virginia, glancing to the money thrown into Tonas’ chicken basket.

“You mean, *I* made at least seventeen Sesterces,” said Tonas, pulling the basket closer to himself.

“What did you find?” asked Claudia eagerly, even though she was almost afraid of the answer.

She didn’t feel much different than when she had gone to sleep, and she didn’t remember anything new. Well, anything besides her dream. Was that bad?

“Ah yes,” began Tonas, looking up at Traj and Virginia. “First off, neither of you are magicians, correct?”

“Yeah,” said Traj. “But what does that have to do with anything?”

Tonas stroked the rough stubble on his chin and turned back to Claudia. He leaned back, and gazed at her pensively.



“Skepticism also has a few words to say about the philosophy of time, you know. For example, if we cannot remember every moment of time, how can we prove they exist? The counterargument would be that since we can remember this moment and several moments previous we should assume that all moments in between the ones we remember have in fact existed. But both assertions, that either those moments do or do not exist, are pretty difficult to prove.”

Claudia blinked. “But what’s all that have to do with me?”

“Well, the reason you cannot remember anything before waking up in that abandoned building is rather simple: It’s because you did not exist before then.”

Claudia stared silently up at him. As if she couldn’t comprehend what he just said.

“Don’t be ridiculous Magister. It’s not like she could have been born a few weeks ago, she must be at least seventeen, eighteen years old,” said Traj, doubtful of the answer.

Tonas hesitated, but eventually continued. “Have you all ever heard of a Paphonian?”

They all shook their heads.

“There is an ancient story about an artist named Pygmalion-”

“About how he falls in love with a statue he made, and then the statue comes to life. I’m familiar with it,” Claudia interrupted him.

“I thought you might be. You see, when a very powerful, very skilled magician tells this story with enough passion and power behind it they can create a special magical construct. For some reason, this construct can only be made using the story of Pygmalion, though no one knows why. These constructs are called Paphonians.

“They are by all measures a human being. They have blood and flesh, hopes and fears, and even free will, though it is known



they are born with many of the same dispositions and ideas their creator had. They are fabricated from the magician's imagination, soul, emotion and are known for their own significant magical powers.

"Last time I did a head count, there are only few magicians in Caeruleus City capable of doing such a feat, even fewer actually know the story. If I really wanted to I suppose I could create one, but I don't. What I just don't understand is why someone would go through all the trouble of creating a Paphonian just to leave her behind."

Claudia stared blankly, her hand was squeezing her yoyo to the point that she thought the wood might splinter. "So you're saying I'm this thing? I'm a Paphonian?"

Tonas nodded. "I almost thought I should try the spell again. But the results were clear. You had no memories to be retrieved or repaired. And no brain damage to explain it conventionally. Not even magic can take away memories that cleanly. You have a right to be skeptical to what I'm telling you, but I believe it is the truth."

"Someone *MADE* me? And, a-and.....th-they just left me behind? They just dumped me on the streets?"

Claudia looked down at her two fair-skinned hands. Hands which had no mother, or father, or family.

For the first time in her life she felt a tear gathering at the edge of her eye.

It was her first tear. And most certainly not her last.

Tonas' eyes widen after he realized just how much the suggestion hurt her.

"But there is another possibility!" he added. "Magical power is derived from the eloquence of the story the magician uses and their own emotion. If the magician who made you was distraught enough he might not have known what he did. He could



have been familiar with the story but not the consequences. He might not know you exist.”

Claudia felt a twinge of hope return to her, even as her tear clung to a few of the hairs that had fallen across her face.

“Is there a way to find out who?”

Tonas groaned. “Maybe...I’ve heard about one way. But I can’t do it. A good Sylvanian magician could. A long time ago they had problems with magicians creating Paphonians to commit crimes for them, so they created a spell that could lead them back to the creator. But the spell can be even more difficult than actually creating the Paphonian.”

It took all of two seconds for Claudia to make her decision. It was an easy one.

“Then I will have to visit the Sylvanians,” she said with determination, wiping the wetness away from her eye.

She noticed Virginia and Traj exchange a worried look, already shocked that their friend was the creation of magic.

“That won’t be very easy. They’re a secretive, untrusting, and assholian bunch.”

“That sounds a bit racist,” commented Traj.

“No, it’s personal. But if you are dead set on finding someone to tell you who your creator is, there is an old man named Hortensius in a small village near the border who can help you. Here’s what you’ll have to do...”

While he gave her directions to the old man in the small village, a single thought consumed Claudia’s mind. A single want.

The thing she had lost that first day was her creator. And she would go to edges of the world and back again to find them.



## Chapter Twenty

### Virginia

The blinds were drawn and the lights dimmed in the study. Not so much to create darkness, but to create a lack of brightness.

Wooden bookshelves stacked with thick manuscripts, chronicles, and encyclopedias lined the walls. Laid out on the marble floor was a map of Caeruleus and a smaller map of the City, and on the antique oak desk was a copy of the Avian Hill Journal, a Praetorian Guard report on the Burning Fasces, and an unfinished sandwich.

Antony was hunched over the Praetorian report, his face plastered with pensive determination.

He had moved back into his family's house after the funeral; he found that he liked the grand mansion much better without his father there.

Once he was admitted into the Decemvirate Council, he decided not to return to school. There was no longer anything it could provide to serve his new ambitions. He was glad to be rid of that foolish place forever.

Now, he could concentrate all his efforts to the plan.

The door to the study opened and Antony raised his eyes off the report.

Virginia came in, wearing a luscious purple dress that matched her eyes. She looked just like the first time he had beheld her.

He smiled and rose to his feet.

"I see you had time to change," he said as he went to her.



“I didn’t think it would be appropriate to see you in my disguise.”

“Then you thought right,” he held her right hand in his. “So tell me, what has happened?”

“The Burning Fasces have accepted me as one of their own. They don’t suspect a thing. I got to see them fight the battle against the Praetorians in the Industrial District, where, luckily, I was able to kill Councilman Servius before he could meddle in our affairs. And you were right, the whole place stank beyond belief,” she reported.

He leaned forward on his toes and captured her lips in a kiss. “Excellent,” he said, once he pulled back.

“I should thank you for this mission, Antony. Besides the odor around the Plebian District, I’ve been enjoying myself.”

“How so?”

“Being with the Anarchists, it felt very laid back, as if I could do whatever I wanted. It made me feel free. And...their leader seemed nice enough.”

Antony let go of her hand. “But you realize what they stand for. The problem they pose,” he said coldly.

She nodded. “They cause chaos, where otherwise there would be power and resources for the Caerulean Empire. I just meant that I enjoyed the infiltration.”

Antony reached up, lacing his fingers in her hair, and pulled back. She winced but otherwise didn’t react.

“Remember, Virginia, that you can’t get too close, or too attached. The Anarchists are not good people, much less good citizens. If they knew who you really were, they would kill you in an instance. We need them for now, but once their purpose is served, they will have to be disposed of. Do you get that?”

“Yes,” she said softly.

“Good. I like you Virginia. You’re a pretty little thing, and your loyalty is something I treasure dearly, but if it weren’t for my





scheme, you'd be useless to me and to Caeruleus. So try not to screw this up."

"I won't..."

Antony released her, and went back to his desk.

"There's something else," she said as he took his seat.

"What?"

"There's another Paphonian in the Burning Fasces."

He sat up quickly to attention. "Who?"

"A girl named Claudia. The thing is she didn't know she was a Paphonian. Traj had to take her to this really powerful magician to find out. She intends to go on a quest to see a Sylvanian elder in order to find out who created her."

"That sounds most unusual. In my opinion there is no good reason to go to Sylvania. Such a backwards place. But, when the opportunity presents itself, try to befriend her and gain her trust. We may be able to use her."

She paused. "I remember there was something odd about Claudia. She was unusually averse to the killing done by her fellow Anarchists. It didn't make sense to me."

He shrugged it off.

"Can ask you a question, Antony?"

He raised an eyebrow. "Alright."

"Is it moral to kill people?"

"For our cause it is. Death is a rather unimportant thing anyway." He returned his attention to the file on his desk. "Just do as you're told. It's not your job to deal with those moral quandaries."

"Yes, Antony," she said obediently.



## Chapter Twenty One

### Going North for the Winter

The long, brown coat Claudia wore was a parting gift from Traj. He said he had stolen it from his father. Originally, she hadn't accepted the gift on the premise that it wasn't Traj's to give. But then he reminded her of the horribly cold weather in the Northern Woods.

Traj had been there with Virginia and Crassus on the platform, waving farewell as the train lurched forward. After a few minutes, they already felt so distant. The only thing that attached her to that life with them was the coat that kept her warm, and the bandanna that declared her allegiance.

She had only been able afford the cheapest tickets. Yet, somehow, the train car was still the nicest room she had ever been in. The seats were cushioned, the floor covered in red carpet, and all the light fixtures made from murky green glass. As soon as she took her seat, she glanced into every odd nook and cranny, every twist of shiny metal and every floral pattern on the seat cushions.

The train made another stop in Caeruleus City and soon, every seat was filled. She stopped looking every which way to avoid the other passengers' attention. She drew her coat close and made sure her leather bag was securely situated between her feet. It didn't feel right, being stuck in such a static crowd in such an unnatural place. But no one else seemed to have such a grievance. So she stayed quiet.

It still wasn't completely real for her, that she had left behind the only life she knew for this journey which had no guarantees, just caveats.



The trip was supposed to take a day and a half. The last train stop wasn't Silva Boreas, the northern most town in Caeruleus. Instead, the tracks ended in Tabernicus, which was only notable for a bar that sold a bucket of assorted meats, fried starches and melted cheeses. She would have to walk the rest of the way.

She had lots of time on her hands. Time in which her mind wandered to thoughts about her creator.

There were so many questions. And she wasn't even sure if she would find them.

Were they a man, or a woman? Were they tall or short? Were they clever or foolish? Did they know what they had done, or not?

She imagined a shadowy, cloaked figure sneaking around the Plebian District until they came to the abandoned building, a hidden place to do their nefarious work. They chanted out the story, waving their hands around mysteriously, and they cackled once her form materialized, making sure to slip away just before the sun rose.

Claudia smiled and shook her head. That probably wasn't how it had happened. Besides, Tonas had said that Paphonians often shared dispositions with their creator and she sure didn't enjoy cackling manically.

But perhaps the reason her creator hadn't revealed themselves was because once they finished the spell and saw her in the flesh they became disappointed. Perhaps she had offended or failed them in some way with her very existence. Of course, that was impossible for her to know. That probably wasn't what had happened either.

She wondered if they would become friends. Or maybe...if she found out...she would finally know where she belonged.

This train, and more broadly, on this journey, wasn't where she belonged. This was a means to an end, and a very



uncomfortable means at that. She would have much preferred to be back on the streets in the E/M District, showing the world what her magic could do.

The train slowed to another stop. More passengers piled on. It was going to be a long ride.



## Chapter Twenty Two

### Intrepid

**I**t was the edge of civilization.

The concrete platform was raised a foot off the ground, gravel at its base, leading to dirt, and then the tall, dying grass.

Atticus' toes were one inch off the platform. He stood there with his school bag on his back, his trench coat on, and his eyes fixed on the horizon.

He had been there for fifteen minutes now. Hadn't even moved. Most of the passengers on the train had disembarked on other stops, and only a few had stayed until the final one in Tabernicus. They had all entered the town by then.

He had no intention of going into Tabernicus; his destination was out there, somewhere past the horizon. The only conventional way to Silva Boreas was a bus service that ran twice a week. The next run was in three days. Instead of waiting, he had decided that he was going to walk from Tabernicus to Silva Boreas.

There had just been some trouble taking that first step.

"Why are you just standing there?" asked a woman's voice.

Atticus glanced in surprise to the left. Already on the grass was a girl in a coat not-unlike his own, a bag slung over her shoulder, wearing a red bandanna, and flicking a yoyo up and down with near subconscious movements.

She stared up at him curiously.

"Well...I was just about to head that way," he pointed towards the grassy plain.

"You were sure taking your time," she replied.

"You were watching me?"



She blushed. "I just thought it was odd, the way you were perched on the platform. As if waiting for something to happen."

Atticus jumped off the ledge as nonchalantly as he could manage. "I guess something did happen."

"Why are you going this way?" she asked.

"To visit family in Silva Boreas."

"Ah," she said in understanding. "I'm going to Sylvania for a...spiritual journey."

"Interesting place to go. I hear they don't like Caeruleans."

She shrugged. "Too late to turn back now."

"Yeah," agreed Atticus, looking again to the horizon. "You figure that way is due north?"

"I think so."

"Good," he said simply. He started walking, oriented by the sun and her words.

After a moment, the girl started walking too. They were a good twenty feet apart from each other, but their heading was the same.

At first neither reacted, they just kept walking, not quite close enough to be considered to be walking together, just toward the same goal.

Awkwardly, Atticus glanced her way.

There was something about her that had inspired intrigue when she had called out to him. Perhaps it was the hidden meaning behind her 'spiritual journey,' or the way she matched his stride, or her striking blue eyes, or even all three. He could sense a story behind her face, her dirty coat, and the way she held onto her yoyo when it was in her hand: clutching it as though her life depended on it.

Of course there was another reason he let his eyes linger. He thought she was attractive.

He looked away, now feeling very self-conscious.

He didn't see when she stole a glance at him.



Slowly, the gap between them grew smaller, with their paths just a few degrees askew in favor of the other traveler's company.

Atticus only noticed when they were almost five feet apart. He was so startled that he stopped moving all together, and Claudia stopped walking as well.

There was silence between them for a moment.

"I'm Claudia," she said.

"Nice to meet you, Claudia."

It returned to silence.

"...I'm Atticus," he said quickly, remembering he hadn't given her his name.

She smiled. "Nice to meet you, Atticus."

"It looks like we're going the same way," he observed.

"Do...do you want to be traveling companions?"

"I would like that," said Claudia.

They started walking again.

"Though I think we will have to go separate ways at the tree line," she added.

"Alright. Together until the tree line. I'm just glad to have someone to talk to. It'd be awfully lonely otherwise. Not that I wasn't expecting to be traveling alone. But it'd still be awfully lonely."

"I get it," said Claudia. "Who's the family you're visiting?"

"My parents. I haven't seen them in, well, over four years now."

"Why not?"

"They left me in Caeruleus City to, quote end quote, 'further my education.' They're rather keen on education."

"I've never really had an education," said Claudia thoughtfully. She had never had the opportunity.

"Oh, I doubt that. No one going on a spiritual journey hasn't been slapped with a few lessons from the universe," replied Atticus.



“I suppose I never needed a formal education much.” She looked to Atticus. “I bet they’ll be happy to see you after so long.”

“Certainly hope so,” he said, not quite sure. “You see, I didn’t tell them I was coming. But what about you? Have any family?”

Claudia looked down hesitantly, almost with embarrassment. “...no.”

“I’m sorry,” said Atticus quickly, suddenly very ashamed of himself.

“You have nothing to apologize for,” she told him.

He clamped his mouth shut, feeling he would swiftly stick his foot inside it.

They walked on, Claudia’s sandals and Atticus’ boots hitting the ground in time with each other. Atticus fought for the confidence to speak again.

“It’s a beautiful day, isn’t it,” he said after a while.

And it was. The air was chilled but not uncomfortably so, and the skies were Caerulean blue with the sun still high, shining unobstructed. The light and the coolness felt nice against their exposed skin.

Claudia glanced up. “Yeah. I don’t think I’ve ever gotten a view like this in the city.” She turned in a circle as she walked and smiled a smile that just barely concealed her urge to frolic about like an excited doe.

“I remember one time I told the story of Terra and Caelum when I was working in the E/M District. The scene my magic made was just like this. It’s hard to believe I’m actually here in real life.”

“You’re a magician?” he asked in surprise.

“Just a street magician,” she replied.

“It’s not often I meet someone else who can do magic. You must be very talented to make a living off it.”

“Maybe.” She shrugged.





As they kept walking it seemed that they continued to move closer together. Only slightly, and very slowly, but surely nonetheless.

Atticus' eyes widen as he felt something touch his hand.

"Since you're a magician too, do you want to tell a story?" asked Claudia. Her hand was open beside his, awaiting permission to proceed.

Cautiously, he took her hand. He felt a tingle of excitement run through him.

"Sure...do you know the story of the first firebird?" proposed Atticus.

"That's a good one," she said. "You can have the first verse if you want."

They refreshed themselves in the story before they began, not breaking step.

"There was a gleeful air in the town of Fidicinae," said Atticus, adopting his storytelling tone. "The townspeople had dressed in their finest clothes with a smile on their lips and anticipation in their souls. The wedding would soon be upon them."

The crunch of dead grass under their shoes began to be replaced by a thud against cobblestone.

"A feast and a joyous night were promised. The bride was dressed in her white dress and fiery orange veil. She was a beautiful young thing, with bright eyes all too impatient to see the man who would place the gold ring on her finger. She was blessed to be betrothed to a rich and noble merchant in the town. The two had made for a pair of star crossed lovers," Claudia continued the story as the bride materialized in front of them.

"All her handmaidens braided her hair save for the most loyal, who watched with a motherly gaze. She was a phoenix, one of the rare and majestic, who had found the girl wandering the plains that surrounded the town, and chose her for a companion



after spying her free spirit. The girl loved her phoenix, and the phoenix, with its power over the flames, would always protect the girl it loved so much,” Atticus took his turn, summoning the bird to sit with the bride.

He had never seen a real Phoenix; no one alive in this day and age had. They were considered to be extinct. However, he allowed his imagination to recreate it, producing the red bird of prey. A creature of power from times of old.

Claudia smiled as she bent down to ruffle its feathers, inciting a yelp of indignity from the all too dignified bird.

“However, there was one who was not happy on this festive day. A rejected lover of the bride. He moped in the shadows; his eyes filled with fury every time he so much as looked at her or her home. The happiness of the town disgusted him and made him clench his fists in rage. And it was on that day the bitter soul put his rage into action, seizing upon a rusty dagger and a horrible plan.”

Claudia diverted her eyes, knowing what would happen next.

“With vehement, strength the boy threw himself at the girl in the orange veil. But the compassionate phoenix went into action first, aiming itself with flaming ferocity at the attacker. Still, that was not enough to stop him. Even as his body burst into flames he slashed through the bird and into the girl’s chest,” said Atticus, trying not to waver his voice, even as the horrific scene carried itself out in front of him. Both he and Claudia squeezed their eyes shut.

“Alas, the three did die needless deaths. And the town grew dark and silent where it was once happy and joyous.”

“But the magic and emotion that surrounded the bond between the phoenix and its girl could not be ignored. Even in death. The blood of the maiden mixed with the ashes of the phoenix, and from there something new broke into the world.



From all the joy and despair of that day the first Firebird was born with fiery orange foliage. A mighty bird of prey destined to fly freely just like its parents. And just like the ignorant bride, it held in its belly a precious treasure, two unborn children. The next true firebirds,” said Claudia, finishing the story.

The town faded away, but an orange, hawkish creature remained. A living, breathing firebird looking at the two curiously with black beady eyes.

“Hi there, little fellow,” said Claudia as she ran the back of her hand over its feathers. Unlike the phoenix, it seemed to enjoy being petted.

“I think we made him together,” said Atticus, as he knelt down and gently tickled the bird’s neck.

Claudia smiled and nodded. “You’re just perfect aren’t you,” she fawned.

“Can we call him Ovid?” he suggested.

The firebird hopped out of Claudia’s reach, and flapped into the open air.

“Alright...but I don’t think we’re going to get to call him by name again...” she said as he flew away.

“Anything could happen,” replied Atticus, watching Ovid make a streak of orange across the sky.

He circled around, flying low. They instinctively ducked as he flew over their heads and then off into the wilderness.

For a little bit, as Ovid flew away, Atticus felt happy. For that golden moment, he forgot about being the Censor, about his loneliness, and having to meet his parents. All that mattered was the little bird he and Claudia had made together.

He looked to her, and she looked to him and they both seemed to recognize the elation in their companion’s eyes. It was only when they realized they were staring that they looked away.

They were still holding hands when the spell was done. They didn’t need to anymore, but neither let go.



“That was fun,” said Claudia as she began to walk forward again, bringing Atticus with her.

“Yeah,” he agreed. “Magic can be really fun. When I’m feeling down it can give me something to feel good about. Even if the story is sad, it can still be beautiful.”

“I understand,” said Claudia quietly. “You see... a while ago I woke up in a room with nothing but the clothes on my back. I couldn’t remember where I had been, or how I got there. I couldn’t remember anything before that moment. I held onto the idea that someone would come looking for me, and no one ever did. I guess no one missed me enough... the first time I performed magic for myself it was so wonderful that I forgot for a while.”

“That’s horrible,” he said. “What did you do?”

“I made some friends, and they’ve been helping me a little. Though, I don’t really feel like I belong with them. Doesn’t really feel like I belong anywhere. Maybe once I finish my journey, I’ll figure that out.”

“Well, if it’s any consolation...I think there is someone out there looking for you. Without a doubt they are scanning the crowds, hoping every second to see your face,” he told her with unwavering certainty. “I met you today, and I know I wouldn’t forget you. And I’ll miss you once we part.”

“Thanks. But I really doubt there’s actually someone out there looking for me.”

Atticus frowned; he hoped she didn’t mean that. He knew what it was like to feel alone in the world.

“May I ask what your grand spiritual journey is for? Are you a following the path of one of the gods?” he inquired.

“No, it’s not that. I guess you could say it’s a journey of self-discovery.”

“To discover your true self?”

She nodded.



“Well, I imagine it’d be a lot like your current self. Except, you know, discovered.”

Claudia smiled. “No one said the discovery would be easy.”

“Maybe I could help you,” he offered. “You are obviously very brave for going on such a journey on your own, obviously very friendly for choosing to walk with me, and, for reasons that are self-evident to me, you’re very beautiful.”

Both of them blushed at his admission. But Atticus continued nonetheless. “That’s three traits right there. I haven’t had time to know the rest of you yet, but I can guess it’s just as good.”

“I suppose that is a fine place to start,” she said, squeezing his hand gratefully.

They went on in silence for a while as they traversed several small, rolling hills. Atticus felt as though his companion gave him strength since he didn’t think he would have made it this far this quickly on his own.

“You know, Atticus, we’ve discussed my motives for my journey. But we’ve only touched upon those for yours. I bet it wasn’t easy living in Caeruleus City without your parents,” said Claudia.

“No...it wasn’t. Sometimes, I wish they would chose to visit me, instead of being obsessed with their jobs all the time. I took care of myself alright, most of the time. I got some help from my friend Quintus. He was always there when I needed him.”

“Sounds like a good guy.”

“The best kind of guy. But I don’t have many friends besides him. Sometimes I talk with his sister when she’s around, but not much besides that. Honestly, I feel pretty lonely most of the time.”

She leaned into him a little. “Well, I hope you can count me as a friend. If just for a little while.”

“Thanks. I will,” he replied. “It’s funny. The thing I hate most is being alone. I just...hate it. The feeling of loneliness. I



never seem to be able to fix it, even though I do it to myself. I hate it because it's all my fault."

"I'm sure it's not all your fault. And maybe you will find a cure at the end of your journey," suggested Claudia.

"Maybe," said Atticus unsure.

It was growing late. The sun touched the horizon, splashing pink and purple into the sky. While the train ride had been long, and they had walked a long time as well, Atticus didn't feel it was quite time for the sun to call it quits.

But it would still be dark soon, and he knew traveling in the dark was not an advisable activity.

Claudia slowed her pace. "We're probably not going to make it to the tree line before sunset. Do you think we should camp here, together?" she asked, hopeful.

"Sure," said Atticus.

They stopped. Reluctantly, he released her hand to set his bag down, allowing his back to relax. Claudia did likewise.

"It will get colder in the night," said Claudia.

"I have a blanket."

"I do too. But...it would be warmer if we shared." She put down her pack and looked to Atticus carefully, awaiting his answer.

The world seemed to grow still as she looked into his eyes. Was it possible, that as she blushed, she felt a mutual attraction and intrigue to him? He didn't think it was possible. He was the one with tired eyes, the one who had hesitated at the edge of the platform, and he was the pathetic loser.

"Yeah," he said quietly, "that's a good idea."

"Hey Atticus." She took a step closer. "Thanks for helping me on the first leg of my journey."

"Likewise."

She reached up slowly, so slow it was as if she wanted him to voice an objection if he had one. But he said nothing as she



cupped his cheek, and made no movement besides a single sharp intake of breath.

A hot wave went through him, and flooded his body with a hazy sense. It was like a soggy mortar that covered everything else with a smooth, static surface, just waiting to be broken by the next wave before it could set.

That wave came when she kissed him.

It was a simple gesture, just two pairs of lips pressing against each other. But for Atticus it was kindness. And it was love. And in the brief moments after she pulled away, and their noses were still close enough to touch, it became his whole world. The best reality he knew by far.

That was the first time he had ever kissed anyone.

Claudia smiled nervously, not sure what to make of his wide eyes until he lifted his own hand up, and gently touched her cheek. They stayed like that for a moment, a pair of hearts jumping between them as twilight began to reign.

Wordlessly, they released the other and retrieved their blankets from their bags. It wasn't long before they bundled themselves up.

Once they were set, their hands found each other's once again. The cold hard weight of the earth beneath them and the vast bitter air above them was soon forgotten with the help of their warm companionship.

"Atticus..." she whispered.

"Yes."

"Do you still feel lonely?"

"No...do you still feel like you don't belong somewhere?"

"No."

"Well then, it appears we are victors today."

She nestled herself closer to him.

"It certainly does."



For a reason he couldn't explain, the boyish magician felt they needed one more story for the night.

"There was a place the world once knew that was a lot like this one. In ancient times when us humans were scattered and insignificant things, and the moon and stars hid themselves in the night."

"Was there?" said Claudia playfully, having recognized the tale.

Atticus smiled and nodded.

"This place was always daytime. There was no sun, moon, stars, or clouds. Just the green planes and the bluest sky the world ever knew. It was a sacred place. Intimate and private. It belonged to Terra and Caelum, gods of the earth and sky. This was where they rested against each other and whispered things of love.

"Yet it seemed no place is secret to the likes of man. There came a day when a group of humans, awed by the perpetual day, made their town in that place. The earth and sky were troubled by the invasion, and thus decided they could no longer meet there.

"But the land was so inhabited by humans and other creatures that they couldn't find another sanctum where they could be alone again. Finally, after searching far and wide for a place to hold each other once again, they returned to that little town.

"They decided it couldn't be the way it had once been. They would have to part, every now and then. But to remind the other of their love in their absence, they traded gifts. Terra sent to Caelum her finest silver ore. Caelum in his cleverness displayed the gift in the night, giving light to the stars with the shiny silver. And Caelum gave to Terra its special blue hue, which she took into her bosom, where she could hold it close to her heart forever, making sapphire minerals."





Atticus and Claudia both closed their eyes serenely, so they didn't see the ghostly echoes, one blue, one silver, walking away. Both with dirty coats, and one with a translucent yoyo.

"All was well," he said sleepily, "even though they were not always together. Since they could always fall in love with each other again in that great big Caerulean Plane. Under that big blue sky, and then those twinkling silver stars using their gift of light in the inky blackness."

The two glowing visages continued to walk away, disappearing into the horizon.

Atticus and Claudia fell asleep without any trouble that night.



## Chapter Twenty Three

### A Fork in the Road

Claudia was the first one to wake up that morning. Drowsily, she had tried to sit up, only to be held back by the tightly drawn blanket. When she looked to the side and saw Atticus, the previous night returned to her mind.

A hot feeling briefly resurged in her and she smiled. He was still there, sleeping sound beside her. He had a severe case of bedhead, despite the absence of a bed, his cheeks were slightly red from being exposed to the cold night air, and there were still dark circles around what she had known yesterday as soft brown eyes.

They had kissed. She remembered when Virginia and Traj had kissed, and somehow knowing they had done it helped give her the courage to do it last night.

She liked Atticus. His kind words about the people who were not looking for her, and the way he had joined her to do magic, were two reasons why. Of course, there was another reason. She thought he was attractive.

He treated himself like such a tiny, insignificant thing. So unsure about his current journey. Not that she was sure about hers. But that only made her want to hug him tight even more.

Eventually she roused him, and they shared a breakfast of squished food from the bags they had also used as pillows.

They talked about things such as a grouchy old man in their lives, (for Claudia, the man who had sent her on his journey, and for Atticus, the man who suggested his coat needed replacing), the state of the anarchy movement in the city, and how grateful each one was for the other's company.



Unfortunately, like all great breakfasts, this one ended all too soon.

They packed up their tiny camp, and continued towards the forest.

It was not long before Claudia could see the tree line in the distance, even though she wished she didn't.

"Try to be safe while you're in there," said Atticus, "I hear there's monsters who live in the woods."

"Like what?"

"You know...giant snakes, spiders, quetulans. Quetulans are the worst, used to have nightmares about them dropping from the ceiling."

Claudia frowned. "Thanks for that."

"Sorry."

"I'm sure I'll be able to take care of myself. Besides, wild animals are supposed to be more afraid of us than we are of them. Right?"

Atticus shrugged. "I dunno. Probably. I've never really dealt with any wild animals. Though, I was attacked by a band of feral cats once."

"How did that end?"

"Well, I kept running until I accidentally fell in the river."

Claudia giggled. "I'll be sure to avoid cats at all costs. They sound like such rude creatures."

"Downright thugs and thieves."

They were getting closer treeline. Each step was a little slower than the last, but it couldn't stop the inevitable.

Soon, they were there, and they stopped just a few feet away from the line.

The edge of the forest was the border between Caeruleus and the Sylvanian Kingdom. The line was established by the best surveyors of the bygone era, and though it was crooked in certain places, it was well maintained. Every few years a crew of Caerulean



workers would have to uproot some trees and mow the long grass to ensure the forest did not encroach farther than it was designated to be.

The only exception to the forest border was the road through it to Silva Boreas, which they had spied about a mile to the right. Atticus would be on his way there once she released his hand.

She was taking her time with that.

“You sure you know which way to go?”

“I got directions from someone who’s been to this place before. Can’t do much better than that,” she replied.

“I hope we see each other again, sometime,” said Atticus.

“Yeah...me too...”

She let go of his hand, and stepped towards the foreboding mass of tree. He didn’t move until she had fully disappeared into the underbrush.



## Chapter Twenty Four

### Silva Boreas

Atticus could see deep into the forest in every direction as he walked down an old beaten road. The deciduous trees were losing the last of their leaves and where there weren't dead leaves on the forest floor there were brown needles littered beneath pine groves.

He was anxious about the approaching reunion, and had a mild urge to run back and join Claudia in the woods. He'd probably just get lost though.

He sighed.

To pass the time, he started humming. The tune drifted on odd, nonsensical patterns, but somehow became sadder as it cycled over and over.

After walking a considerable distance, Atticus stopped. Something felt off.

He suddenly realized the melody he was humming wasn't just in his mind or throat. It was coming from the forest. He clamped his mouth shut and listened.

It was a sad song, sung by a woman's voice. It came from off the right side of the path. But there were no words, just a long, deep lamentation.

It stopped, as if the singer realized he was no longer humming.

Atticus blinked. He wondered who could have been singing out there in the middle of nowhere.

He was surprised again when he turned his attention back to the path.



There was a woman standing there, pointing a short, ornate knife at him.

She had a shiny bejeweled hairpiece in her long golden-blond hair that was braided to her waist, and the dress she wore was made from expensive looking silver lace but was torn and shredded in a thousand places.

The woman looked older than him, but the way she grinned wildly, and the way she held the knife, her wrist pointed down, it was almost childlike.

Atticus waved timidly. "Salvé..."

She sauntered forward.

"Were you the one singing?" he asked, glancing left and right nervously.

She nodded, still coming closer, her eyes narrowing curiously.

"Look...I should really be on my way," he said, trying to step around her.

Before he could leave, she whipped up the knife, aiming the point right between his eyes. He gulped.

She studied his face.

Now that she was this close, Atticus realized that she was a Sylvanian. She had their unusual kind of eyes, with irises that were black while her pupils were an odd meld of green-blue and grey, inverted from other races.

She sniffed him and wrinkled her nose. "You are an evil thing," she said decisively.

"Hehe...nice to know..."

The Sylvanian tilted her head. "And you are Atticus Permisc."

"I actually knew that one already."

Slowly, she lowered her knife.

"You wouldn't happen to know how long it is to Silva Boreas?" asked Atticus, glancing down the path.



She didn't reply. He looked back only to discover she had disappeared.

"Oh great..." whispered Atticus to himself, casting a look over his shoulder.

How had she known his name?

"That was creepy," he muttered to himself as he started walking down the path faster than before.

Experimentally he smelled his sleeve. Nothing unusual. He wondered what that essence of evil she detected was about. Maybe it was the stain by his elbow.

The rest of the way to the town yielded no more surprises.

Silva Boreas was a small, homely thing, especially compared to the grandness of Caeruleus City. Unlike the city, made with marble, granite and various precious stones, the town was built from simple wood and brick.

It was the only Caerulean town in the Northern Forests. He remembered learning in history class that it was the result of a grand treaty between Sylvania and Caeruleus a few centuries ago. It had been one of the first acts of the Senate, which had just been formed by the king. It prevented what would have surely been a particularly nasty war.

The boundary between the town and the forest was obvious. All the buildings and homes were clustered together at least four hundred feet away from the line of trees.

Atticus continued on the main road, until he reached an open square filled with the rural inhabitants. Everyone wore warm clothes, and looked curiously at Atticus as he passed, immediately identifying him as a stranger.

Atticus didn't precisely know where in town his parents lived, or worked. They hadn't explained it well in any of their letters. He would have to ask someone.

He stopped in front of a street vendor's cart stocked with winter hats, gloves and scarves. The vendor seemed to benefit



greatly from his merchandise, as he wore a knitted wool cap, four striped scarves and the thickest pair of mittens he had ever seen.

“Could you point me to where the embassy is?” asked Atticus, politely.

The old man swaddled in clothes smiled at the opportunity. “You have to buy something first.”

Atticus frowned, feeling like he was being extorted

“...give me one of those hats,” he said reluctantly.

The vendor reached forward as far as he could without moving his butt trying to grab the requested merchandise. “Why do you want to know?”

“I’m visiting family.”

“Who? I know most people around here.”

“Valens and Carmen Permisc.”

“Ahhhh, the Ambassadors. They’re good people. You look like you’re a decent son. But the Sylvanians ambassador has a little monster spawn. She’s a thief! Stole one of my best scarves and just last week broke into my house and moved all the furniture in front of the door. Stupid Cynthia.”

“Hey!” the vendor next to them shouted. “It’s not nice to talk bad about such beautiful people,” he said wishfully.

Instead of handing Atticus his hat, the older vendor hit his colleague with it.

“Please ignore my misguided son, Tiberius,” said the hat vendor bitterly.

Tiberius grumbled and handed a wax wrapped parcel to a customer. The line for his food was much longer than the nonexistent line for the clothes. Unlike his father, he wore a pair of shorts, a thin white top and a pair of black sunglasses with a cracked right side lens. He could have easily just stepped out of a picture of the southern beaches, instead of working in the most northern and coldest town in the country.





Atticus furrowed his brow. "This Cynthia, she wouldn't happen to have really long blond hair? With like a tiara?"

"Yeah, just like that. Except, you know, radiantly divine."

"Thank you," replied a voice.

The father yelped and Atticus turned.

There she was, eating a sandwich stolen from the food stand.

Tiberius slipped on a silly grin and slid his sunglasses up his forehead. "You can have all the sandwiches you want," he said.

Cynthia giggled at the food salesman. She was still holding that knife, and there was something awfully familiar about it to Atticus.

The father lunged across his cart, swiping at her with the hat. She quickly sliced it in two. She giggled a little more as he struggled to hit her.

Tiberius made an audible sigh. "Your laugh is so euphonious," he said.

Cynthia ignored him, and turned her attention to Atticus. Her face quickly turned to one of contempt.

"You shouldn't have come here," she said darkly.

The father lunged one more time at the Sylvanian, who quickly dodged and began walking away with the sandwich.

Atticus, however surprised by her arrival, was able to get over the oddness of it all to look back to the father nearly foaming at the mouth, swatting at the air. His son was still staring at Cynthia with drunk eyes.

He shook his head.

"Where is the embassy?" Atticus asked one more time, sliding a few Sesterces across the stand and stuffing the sliced hat into his pocket.

"What?!" the old one shouted, still fuming. His demeanor changed when he noticed the money. "Oh...keep going down that



road then take a right. It's the biggest building in town, can't really miss it."

Atticus walked on, following the instructions. He hoped he could get this ordeal over quickly.

At just three stories high, the embassy was indeed the largest building in town. It was made from plain brick, but had a line of marble vertically splitting the face in half and a bell tower on the side.

The marble stripe ended above two stained-wood doors which stood before him.

He could feel the full weight of his pent up anxiety from over the last four years, but he was forced to just sigh and shrug it off to step into the embassy.

Inside was a small lobby, at the end of which was a woman behind a desk with a few streaks of grey in her hair. Atticus approached her, and set his hands down carefully on the edge of her desk.

"Excuse me..." he said, butterflies fluttering in his stomach.

She looked up with a raised eyebrow from the book she was reading.

"Could you please tell the ambassadors that I'm here."

"Do you have an appointment?" she asked, probably already knowing he didn't.

"Tell them their son is here to see them."

"Oh," she said simply, bookmarking her page. "One moment please." She stood up and walked into the other room.

Atticus stuffed his hands into his jacket pockets, but then immediately withdrew them to take off his bag and jacket. He was afraid if they didn't see his old clothes they might not recognize him. That left him in his black and white shirt and dark brown pants.

He prematurely tried to imagine them walking through the doors.



He had a picture of them in a drawer in his dorm. It was from their honeymoon, at least that's what they called it. The academy had paid them to go around the world and write anthropological anthologies, a journey that eventually ended with their positions as Ambassadors. In the picture they were standing on a rock in one of the great boulder fields of the west, both smiling.

The woman returned, and sat back down at her desk to continue reading. Atticus waited for a moment, but no one else joined her.

"...are they going to see me?" he asked.

"Sorry kid, but they're in an important meeting with the Sylvanian Ambassador. They'll be with you once it's over."

"Oh..." he said quietly.

He had waited four years. Surely, just a few more minutes wouldn't matter all that much?

He sat down on a bench against the wall and thought about his options. Maybe if he left now they would just assume it was some kind of prank? He started shaking his leg in place as a vain attempt at distraction from the painfully slow ebb of time.

After the brief eternity of fifteen minutes, the doors to the other room opened and out came two men and a woman.

There was a split second of delay for him to recognize his mother and father.

His mom wore a stola, like the kind Claudia wore, except with sunflowers, and had her black hair in a bun. His dad's head was shaved bald, Atticus was fairly sure it hadn't been that way before, and he wore a simple tunic. It looked as though they had just come from a Sunday brunch instead of a diplomatic meeting.

For a moment, they paused, caught in surprise.

Atticus stood up, about to summon his courage and explain what he was doing there when his mother rushed forward and threw her arms around him.



“Hi mom...” he was cut off as his mother squeezed all the air out of chest.

“I can’t believe you’re here! I thought the secretary was joking! What are you doing here? How did you even get here? The bus doesn’t come till tomorrow?” She squeezed even tighter. “I missed you so much.”

Atticus hugged her back lightly. “I walked from the last train station.”

His dad put his hand on his shoulder and smiled. “It’s good to see you, Atticus,” he said.

“You walked all the way from the train station?” asked Carmen. “Why didn’t you tell us you were coming? We could have sent you the embassy’s car.”

“I wanted it to be a surprise, so I would be the one to tell you I am going to be the new Censor.”

His father’s eyes widened. “You are going to be the next Censor?!”

Atticus nodded with a silly grin.

“Of Caeruleus?!”

“No, of the Academy’s geological society. Yes of Caeruleus! And Quintus has been chosen to be the next Tribune of the Plebs!”

“How did you do that?” he asked incredulously.

“I have no idea,” replied Atticus, quickly deciding they didn’t need to know the details.

Valens glanced to the fourth party in the room, who had up till then been silent. “Terribly sorry, I should introduce you two. Atticus, this is Ambassador Iathina. Decens, this is my son, Atticus.”

The Sylvanian Ambassador held out a thin, pallid hand. “A pleasure,” he said dryly, as Atticus shook it.

The man had white hair that was like strips of bleached seaweed, and his eyes were a golden brown in the center, encircled with blue irises. He wore a bright, white Caerulean style suit.



“We were just talking in the conference room with ambassador Iathina about Sylvanian literature for our research. Sorry we didn’t wrap up when you got here,” said Valens.

“I met your daughter on my way here, Ambassador,” said Atticus.

Decens’ face turned to one of concern. “Cynthia did not trouble you, did she?” he asked.

“Oh no. Not excessively.” replied Atticus.

He sighed. “Again I must apologize for her taking your family’s knife. I understand it is of great sentimental value.”

“It’s alright,” said Valens halfheartedly, shifting under the gaze of his wife.

“So Atticus,” began his mother, “you have to tell us what you’ve been up to lately. Your letters only said so much.”

“I will. I should be able to stay for two days before I have to go back and take up my new duties. I’m sure we’ll have lots to talk about.” said Atticus.

“Of course! And your father and I can tell you about the book we’ve been working on. The most comprehensive work on Sylvanian Culture to be published in Caeruleus,” said Carmen proudly.

“Great!” replied Atticus trying and failing to sound enthusiastic.

His father nodded. “Decens and Cynthia have been very helpful in our research.”

“Yes. I must say that Valens and Carmen have conjured very inquisitive and creative questions. Not all of which were within my power to answer,” said Decens in a very official manner, “And perhaps as you show your son Silva Boreas I shall attempt to locate Cynthia. The inhabitants have been complaining about her activities of late.”

“A great idea,” agreed Carmen. “I hope you and Cynthia get along well, she really is such a nice girl”



Decens and Valens exchanged a look that said they knew better.



## Chapter Twenty Five

### The Sylvanians

The canopy provided a veil of shadows that shielded the ground from even the brightest midday sun. It was difficult for things to grow with such little sunlight save some moss and ferns.

The wind was lazy, the birds felt content without a single chirp, and even the crow found nothing funny to laugh about. The only constant noise was Claudia's feet cracking twigs and crunching leaves on the forest floor.

It was difficult to keep her bearings with all the obstructions between her and the sun. She did her best to maintain the Northwest direction Tonas had instructed her to.

She had her yoyo in her right hand, but she wished she had Atticus for a companion instead. In fact, it would have been preferable for him to travel with her here, and not on the plain. There was a significant lack of monsters ready to jump out at her in the Caerulean leg of her journey.

The forest was a very disorienting place; every tree looked like the next. It wasn't like the city at all. Claudia was out of her element.

Still, she had her mission. And that was enough to propel her through a thousand monster infested forests.

She started walking with a faster pace when she suddenly felt her foot connect with a hard rock.

"Dammit," she muttered, stopping in her tracks, and waiting for the pain to subside in her stubbed toe.



She soon realized the offending rock wasn't there randomly. It was part of a line of rocks, the kind that was just the right size to be picked up and hurled at a person of disdain with great efficiency.

The line went as far as she could see in both directions. She wondered why anybody would go through all the trouble of making a line of rocks in the middle of the forest. Was it a boundary? A toe stubbing trap? An artistic statement?

After a moment she carefully stepped over the line, and then stopped on the other side, as if waiting for something to happen.

She felt a breeze flow past her, but aside from that, nothing...

Claudia made to continue on her path when suddenly something smashed into her back, careening her face first into the moist peat.

"Hey!" shouted Claudia, trying to push herself back up under the weight of her attacker, but to no avail as her head was forcibly pushed back into the ground.

"Intruder! We've got an intruder!!" exclaimed her attacker gleefully. It was a woman's voice, shouting like she found a cute puppy instead of an "intruder."

Claudia didn't stop struggling, even as more people shuffled through the woods to see what the commotion was about.

"Venitia! What do you think you are doing! Get off her!" shouted another woman, like she was nagging at a child. Slowly Claudia felt the weight come off her back, but she didn't dare get up out of fear of the people who were staring at her.

"Ah, but Mother, she's an intruder and *clearly* a threat. Plus she smells funny," protested who Claudia assumed was Venitia.

Claudia slowly allowed her gaze to drift up. There was a small crowd of curious Sylvanians gathering around her, about





seven. Out of them she could only pick out two men, one old, one young, the rest were women.

The one who tackled her to the ground sulked back towards the onlookers, disappointed. If Claudia hadn't heard her voice, nor noticed the subtle swell of her breasts, she wouldn't have guessed she was a woman.

Unlike all the others, even the two men, her hair was cut short, she wore a pair of loose fitting pants and tunic as well as a Caerulean style blue cap, like the ones nurses wore. On her right hand she had a gauntlet: a heavily worn leather glove with sturdy metal plates attached.

The crowd whispered among itself about the girl who had fallen in front of them.

"Hortensius," spoke the mother urgently, eyeing Claudia with suspicion.

"I know," said a man, the oldest out of the group.

His skin appeared to be tired of its job and was covered in liver spots. His thin hair fell to his forearm, and his solid green eyes were sunken deep into his skull. He seemed to be a creature from another time.

For the first time in her life Claudia felt like she was an alien, with the way they all spectated her. She brought herself up slowly, not daring to move away from that spot

"What brings you here?" asked Hortensius.

"I...I need your help," said Claudia.

He was about to reply when the mother beat him to the answer.

"No!" she shouted. That earned her a glare from the old man.

"What is it you want, Paphonian?" he asked.

"How do you know what I am?" asked Claudia, surprised.

"I can smell the magic on you."

"Oh..."



She wasn't aware magic had a smell.

She cleared her throat. "I want to know who made me," she told them finally.

Hortensius' old face turned to one of worry, as if he had just been giving an especially entangled knot to unravel.

"I see..." he said. "Perhaps it is best if we discuss this with the other elders," he suggested to the woman who had spoken up.

"Must we?" she asked.

"Yes, I think so," he replied flatly as he began to walk back towards the village.

Had the villagers not been there to guide her, she probably would have walked right past the town. There were only about twelve houses in a small clearing that was surrounded on all sides by impenetrable undergrowth. The four narrow paths that twisted into the clearing had carefully disguised entrances made from tree branches and brambles.

She was led in with Venitia walking behind her as if to ensure she wouldn't try to run away.

The buildings they lived in were something she had never seen before. Ten out of the twelve were perfect, brown cubes with a leather flap for a doorway. She couldn't identify what they were made out of, but her best guess was some kind of stone. The two buildings that weren't cubed had a simple cone shape, but looked like they were made from the same stuff. On the other side of the clearing was a garden, and in the middle of the circle of buildings was a large fire pit.

Hortensius quickly disbanded the crowd, sending them off to do the chores that originally occupied them.

But they still stared and whispered about her every chance they had. It seemed that Atticus was right: Sylvanians didn't take kindly to strangers. She wasn't even sure they would help her.

"Wait out here," he told her before entering one of the cube houses along with Venitia's mother and three of the older villagers.



Uneasily, Claudia folded her arms and sat down against the smooth brown wall. She still couldn't tell what it was made of, it had no grain like stone or wood.

Venitia stood over her as a watchful, albeit giddy, sentinel.

"So you're from Caeruleus, right?" she asked.

Claudia nodded.

"Wow! I can't even remember the last time someone from Caeruleus came here. And I don't think a Paphonian has ever been to Frixfrox! Not that we would ever want one, but it's still really unlikely."

"This place is called Frixfrox?"

"You knew how to find us, but you didn't know what our village is called?"

"This village is so small, I didn't even know it had a name."

"We keep ourselves small and out of sight so bad people can't find us. Like Paphonians!" she replied cheerfully.

"And what's so bad about a Paphonian?" asked Claudia, narrowing her eyes.

"You never know where their allegiances are," said Venitia, not noticing how she had offended her.

Claudia sighed. "You know, you didn't have to tackle me earlier."

"Of course I did! I'm the official armed force of Frixfrox, and that means patrolling the border for any threats and/or intruders. Like you! The magic Hortensius put on the rocks only works to keep wild animals out of the village."

"He's a magician?"

"Yes. He's our patron."

"So do you think he'll help me?"

Venitia shrugged. "I don't know. That's up to him, the Matron, and the elders. My mom's the matron, but she doesn't like it when I tackle intruders and threats. She doesn't like Caeruleans either. Or Paphonians."



“Oh...” said Claudia. She hoped Hortensius and the other elders were more tolerant.

She glanced up, and noticed there was a boy walking from the smoldering fire pit towards her. He wasn’t one of the Sylvanians who had come to see her in the woods.

His long auburn hair was in a braid, and he had his left arm in a sling. With his uninjured hand he dragged a crooked stick behind him, tracing a swirvy line next to his footsteps. His shoulders were slouched down in a depressed manner, keeping his eyes pointed down. He stopped in front of Claudia and Venitia.

“I shouldn’t talk to you,” he said.

Claudia paused her growing anxiety to look at him oddly. “Okay...”

“Pristrix!” exclaimed Venitia. She energetically ran up to him with a bounce in her step and shook his unhurt arm. He didn’t react.

“Take a look! This is the intruder I caught! She was sulking like a creepy shadow around the boundary when I took her by surprise and laid her out with my gauntlet!” explained Venitia excitedly. Claudia decided it best not to refute the story.

“You shouldn’t have been in the forest,” said Pritrix, pointing his stick towards Claudia. “The forest is dangerous. Especially dangerous for Caeruleans.”

“Yeah...I know.”

“Oh, don’t listen to Pristrix. He’s afraid of everything!” exclaimed Venitia.

“Am not...” he muttered.

Claudia was about to ask how he had broken his arm, when suddenly Hortensius poked his head out of the cloth doorway.

“We have come to a decision,” he said, beckoning for Claudia to come inside.

She followed him in, where the other elders waited, sitting legs crossed on a white rug. Claudia noticed the room was



considerably warmer than the air outside, despite the absence of a clear heat source.

Everyone seemed satisfied, even the Matron. Hortensius took his seat next to her, opposite the door.

Claudia sat down in the middle of the circle formed by the elders, facing Hortensius.

“You may have encountered a welcome that appeared slightly hostile, however you should know the village is very pleased to have you among us,” he spoke with great care, as if he was afraid to offend her, or more likely, the other council members.

“However, please understand what you ask is no easy task. Searching for your creator would require the skill and effort of everyone in this room. I, personally, am the only one here that has ever taken part in such a process. There is no guarantee we will be able to accomplish it,” he paused, taking an uneasy glance to the Matron.

Claudia was becoming more and more worried she was going to be rejected.

“We know it must be difficult to be an abandoned Paphonian. Therefore we will give you an opportunity. I believe you already met a child of our village named Pristrix. His arm was wounded by a Quetulan that’s been attacking our village for nearly two months. It has proven to be a very persistent and intelligent irritation. Are you familiar with the creature?” he asked.

Claudia nodded slowly. “...somewhat.”

“Well, it is an ugly thing for the most part. Its skin is hard like the bark of an oak tree, and it has sharp, long claws, one of which extends back over its forearm. It hides itself on the trunks of old trees, nearly impossible to detect. When its prey strays too close, it jumps down and slashes at their neck. That’s how Pristrix broke his arm, with the weight of the creature descending upon him. If it had a chance to go at his throat then I doubt there would



be much of him left. Fortunately he was able to sprint behind the boundary before it could finish its task.”

“Normally,” began Venetia’s mother, “we would have to organize the entire village to drive it out into the open and kill it, but with most of our young men gone it will probably take twice as long. This way is much easier.”

Hortensius shifted hesitantly. “The deal is this: if you rid us of the beast then we will help you find your creator.”



## Chapter Twenty Six

### The Ambassadors

Carmen and Valens were babbling on about how all ethnic Sylvanians were inherently partially colorblind to Atticus and Decens. They all meandered towards a large fountain in the town square; its water frozen in the pools on each tier.

“If only one of our scientists could dissect an eye so we could fully comprehend the difference,” said Carmen. “It would really complete the chapter we were writing about the importance of color in society.”

Decens blinked uneasily. “I assure you our natural philosophers have notes on the phenomena. It may be difficult, but I should be able to procure some research if you two are this keen on investigating.”

Valens smiled, and looked like he was about to take Decens up on his offer when they were all distracted by a loud cracking noise from the other side of the square.

A door to one of the shops had just been broken off its hinges. Smiling, Cynthia strutted out through the broken doorway. In one hand she held the knife, and in the other she had a lock of hair.

The old street vendor was right behind her, his arms swatting wildly. He may have landed a few blows had his son not been there to restrain him.

Atticus realized it was that old man’s hair she had stolen.

Decens, having finally found his daughter gone rogue, walked with a steely sort of calm towards her. She was too busy



taunting Tiberius's father to notice him until he grabbed her by the ear and half-dragged her away.

"Ah!" she exclaimed in pain.

"I want her deported!" shouted the old vendor. "You hear me, ambassador? *Deported!*"

"I'm sorry, on behalf of my father," said Tiberius. "You have a very beautiful daughter!"

Decens ignored both of the Caeruleans and addressed his daughter. "Why did you steal the knife and that man's hair?"

Cynthia rubbed her ear timidly, looking down at her bare feet.

"I don't know... It was fun," she said.

Decens stared at her, his mouth open, as if he wanted to condone and lecture her, but he couldn't find the proper words.

"Go give them back," he told her with a sigh.

She quickly ran over to the old street vendor and sprinkled his hair over his winter hat. His son held back his rage, and flashed her a smile.

Cynthia then flipped the knife around to hold the sharp edge, and walked over to the Permiscs with her arm outstretched, returning Valens' family dagger. He graciously accepted.

He and Carmen quickly picked up where they left off, and described in detail every facet of culture imaginable that color related to power in Sylvania. Atticus simply sighed quietly as they made their way back to the embassy for dinner. He had barely gotten a word in edgewise so far.

Atticus knew Caeruleus and Sylvania's relationship was unique. The Sylvanian Kingdom was effectively cut off from the rest of the world, and Caeruleus was the only country besides the Neo-Saxum Confederation that had any diplomatic relations with them. Even then, no real information about the goings on in Sylvania ever left the country, not even through the ambassadors. His parents and Decens were nothing but figureheads, which is





how his parents had landed the jobs in the first place. They weren't diplomats or politicians, they were anthropologists. No diplomat or politician could ever hope to learn anything about Sylvania, but anthropologists were given more opportunities, all in the name of human science and prosperity.

This came to a head in the casual nature of the embassy, which only separated the Caerulean and Sylvanian parts with a white marble line. There were no classified documents or such government secrets kept in the building, so the ambassadors and their staffs *could* converse without much restraint (though, from what Atticus had seen so far, they did not). Ostensibly, when the treaty that formed the embassy was made, this was to increase trust and cooperation between the two nations.

In the middle of the two sovereign lands was the dining room. It was the place they had convened while Decens was in his office, briefly speaking to his staff about something or other.

The dining room table could have seated twenty people, however only a tiny chunk of it was plated with food: just five seats. Ignoring the white line, Atticus and his father sat on the Sylvanian side while his mother and Cynthia sat on the far Caerulean side.

Carmen was gently brushing Cynthia's hair with a melancholy look.

It had been a long time since Atticus had seen his mother act motherly, and watching that moment that was fit for a mother and daughter made something feel off inside of him.

"You shouldn't steal things, Cynthia. It isn't kind. You are very sweet, but if you steal things people won't see that, now will they? You wouldn't like it if I stole your things, would you?" asked Carmen as she combed.

Cynthia shrugged her shoulders into a slouch.

"But it's fun..." she protested.

Carmen gave a quick, harsh tug on her delicate hair.



“Ow!” exclaimed Cynthia, quickly covering the back of her head.

“That was fun. Should I do it again?” asked Carmen, folding her arms.

Cynthia shook her head. Having finished her lesson, Carmen returned to brushing.

“It’s odd the bond your mother has formed with that girl,” commented Valens in a whispered tone.

“Yeah...” replied Atticus. In an attempt to distract himself, he turned to the food on the table. “Dinner’s probably getting cold.”

“Yeah, it probably is,” said Valens absent-mindedly, still staring at his wife and the Sylvanian.

The door on the other side of the room opened, and Decens walked in with a troubled look about him. Cynthia and Carmen gravitated towards their seats.

“Everything alright?” asked Valens.

“No, I’m afraid Adia, the doctor of our envoy, had her brother pass away recently. She is leaving to attend his funeral.”

“Adia? Oh, poor thing,” said Carmen, shaking her head. “What happened?”

“I’m afraid the nature of his death is an internal Sylvanian matter,” replied Decens.

Valens sighed. “Always so much secrecy... and if I’m correct that is the fifth family tragedy to strike your staff this month. They all seem very much on edge, I mean more so than usual. If there is some sort of crisis going on, then I assure you, Caeruleus would gladly lend you its friendly assistance.”

Decens held up his hand. “Pardon me for speaking so bluntly, but I doubt anyone in the Capital or in all the Kingdom would freely accept aid from your government. They all have very strong feelings of pride and independence from outside influences



as well as a...shall I say prejudice. If it were up to me, things would be very different.”

“Yes, I know...” said Carmen sadly.

To Atticus, it was as though the Sylvaniae were attached to the rest of the world only by a thread tied to the thumbs of the ambassadors, as he watched the exchange.

“We shouldn’t speak of such depressing things,” said Decens. “It is my understanding that your son has won an important position within your country. We should celebrate.”

“What position?” asked Cynthia suddenly, her fork stopped in mid stab towards a piece of rabbit meat.

“Our dear Atticus is going to be the Censor,” said Carmen proudly. “You see, I always knew keeping you in the academy would pay off. There is always a good use for a degree in philosophy these days.”

Atticus raised his eyebrows. “My main focus of study was rhetoric, not philosophy.”

“Then why were you always talking about philosophy class in your letters?”

“Because my teacher was the only entertaining thing to write about. It’s not like I was doing anything else you guys would find interesting.”

“Why rhetoric?” asked his father, scratching his head.

“Because I want to be an orator. It’s what I’ve always wanted!”

Cynthia narrowed her eyes as she chewed her meal with her mouth open.

“I’m just saying, it doesn’t teach you much about the world around you,” replied Valens.

“It teaches me how other people think. And besides, without rhetoric, many other subjects would be next to useless,” said Atticus.



“Well, I still believe there is virtue in learning philosophy and anthropology,” said his mother, chewing on a mouthful of buttered broccoli.

“I never said otherwise,” replied Atticus.

“Well...my congratulations still stand...” said Decens awkwardly.

The dinner went on in silence, save for the sound of forks scratching against ceramic plates.

Once it was over, Atticus slipped out of the embassy. His excuse: just a walk to get fresh air, but in all honesty it was to leave the space of his parents for a breather.

He didn’t like the sky that night. It was too dark and cloudy. There was no moon or stars, just one boring black monochrome.

And though there were street lights in the square, they failed to provide the same ambient grey of the city.

In some ways he liked it out there though: despite the cold air, and the bleak sky, it was peaceful.

He sighed and crossed his arms over his chest to keep himself a little warmer.

He gazed up, hoping a patch would open in the clouds, and he let his mind wander. He wondered how Quintus was doing. He would be starting his duties soon. Atticus had no doubt he would be a truly great Tribune, and he smiled a little, looking forward to when he could stand by Quintus’ side and watch him work.

He wondered about Claudia too. Had she found what she was looking for yet? And, to a much greater extent, he wondered if he would ever find her again.

He sighed and looked back down to earth, only to jump back in surprise. Standing before him, barefoot on the cold cobblestone, was Cynthia with a devious smile on her lips.

“What do you want?” asked Atticus, trying to regain his composure.



“You honestly don’t know what you’ve done. Do you?”  
Seeing Atticus’ blank look, she laughed.

“You really are an idiot. And it never ceases to amaze me how much power the world gives to people like you, all just for a few evil deeds.” She sauntered closer and closer until he could see her long eyelashes against her inverted eyes.

“Look I have no idea what you’re talking about. And frankly I don’t care. Can’t you just...leave me alone?”

Cynthia took another step forward, putting herself so close that their bodies almost touched. Atticus felt uncomfortable.

“You are my enemy,” she said quietly. “You are the embodiment, the best representation I’ve seen by far, of everything I despise in this world.”

Atticus leaned back. “Which is?”

“Power over others. Authority, whether given by society or countries or anyone, that’s where bad things come from. Don’t you know? As an orator, a Censor, and the master of a Paphonian, you have exploited nearly every kind of method of manipulation possible.”

“What’s a Paphonian?” he asked, confused.

She ignored him. “I’ve seen all the things people with authority have done, and I’ve seen the damage they can do. I’ve felt it. All my life. Whether it be the Sylvanians who want to slit my throat, or Decens who thinks he can control me. I hate them all.”

Atticus took a step back. “How can you hate your father like that? And...why would anybody want you killed? Well, you know, except for being incredibly disturbing.”

“Decens isn’t my father!” she sneered. “And as for wanting me killed: I’m of the Iathina family. The most stupid family in all of Sylvanian: the Royal family. Which means half the country will want me dead regardless of anything else. Two: I am only half Sylvanian. A bastard child from a country that takes its pride from being up and above and the rest of the world, so far above that no



one dare touch it. To them, my flesh is an abomination. So they were convinced by the Sylvanian orators, which brought forth the magicians to curse my name, the politicians to ask for my execution or banishment, and the assassins to slit my throat, and Decens, my dear uncle, to idiotically shelter me, because he thinks I can't fight them."

Atticus swallowed. "Look...I'm sorry about all that--"

"They were your kind," she said viciously. "Master manipulators. Their power came from others. My power isn't like that. It is my own, and comes from no one else. So I wonder..."

She reached forward, and snatched his revolver right out from within his coat, and cast it off to the side. "My power against yours, here in this empty square without any petty weapons like knives or guns to aid us, who would win?"

Atticus stared at where his revolver landed. "That gun is literally never going to come in handy, is it?"

Cynthia's hand lunged forward, and grasped his neck. Atticus' eyes widened.

"Pay attention, Censor Permisc. We start...now!" she released him, and stepped back.

Atticus glanced nervously to the embassy. Perhaps if he ran he could make it there before she caught him.

He was just about to make a move when he heard her voice.

She had started to sing. It was a harsh, fast, violent melody moving with all the energy of a ocean wave during a winter storm. Just as before, there were no words, but instead of sadness, there was only hatred.

He made a run for the embassy when the magic began. First a bright red glow surrounded the square, and then tall, stone walls suddenly rose up, holing him in.

Atticus kept running, knowing it was probably an illusion. Unfortunately, when he hit the wall, the sharp pain in his face begged to differ.



He whirled around, and watched as more walls sprung up, forming a maze around him.

*“Okay...this isn’t good,”* he thought to himself. *“I don’t think I’ve even met a magician as powerful as her. At least no one who can conjure up solid objects that quickly. Well, either she really is that good, or she just hates me that much.”*

He looked up to the sky again, searching for an answer.

The clouds only swirled above his head. But, for only a heartbeat, a sliver of moonlight leaked through, and his face hardened with resolve. He stripped off his jacket and rolled up his sleeves.

“No. This night is mine. And no one, no ambassador, or parent, or magician is going to take it away from me. The senate and my nightmares can torment me all they want, but when I walked out into the city with the sun down, the world belonged to me, for just a little while. You hear that Cynthia! The night is mine. Because this is the time when insomniacs rule the world!”

He walked into the maze, not knowing what she had prepared for him, only knowing he could take it on.

“I slept in a graveyard once,” he said, stuffing his hands into his pockets, walking forward with an even pace. “And as I rested in a mausoleum, I dreamt the dead had come for me, with their ghosts and their skeletons.” He recalled the bad dream with a bleak hue tinging it, just like the one that surrounded him now.

“They chased me, and chased me through the city. First, I ran to the Praetorian Guard, I jumped and shouted and waved, trying to get their attention. But they said the ghosts had all paid their taxes before they died, so nothing could be done. So I ran on, because they were catching up.”

He could still hear Cynthia’s song, and even the roar of monsters awaiting him just around the corner.

“Next I ran into the Anarchists, and I called out to them, and pointed and exclaimed about the skeletons wreaking havoc.



But they laughed, and caused some chaos of their own. I got away just before they started throwing bottles at me.”

The first beast he encountered was a giant manticore, growling with its lion muzzle and rearing to fight with its scorpion tail. Atticus let out an impressed whistle, even as a hoard of skeletons clawed their way up from the ground, and latched onto the wild thing. He didn’t even break step as it was torn to bits.

“At one point I tripped and fell, only to find myself at my parents’ feet. I begged them to hide me, to shelter me, and save me from the forces of evil. They scolded me and said I should have paid better attention in biology and metaphysics. So I crawled away as fast as I could.”

Though it didn’t look like it, Atticus was very much afraid of the Sphinx that blocked his path. He was deathly scared of the maze and all its twisted creatures. Just like he had been scared of the undead in his dream. That was what fueled his spell: the terror all around him and within him.

The fear was everywhere. Pumping his heart and sweating cold sweat. But he buried it down, beneath his skin, to move on.

He sneaked past the Sphinx as it became preoccupied telling riddles to the ghosts.

Finally, he walked into the center of the maze, where Cynthia stood with energy crackling and swirling all around her. He waved to her.

“The last person I stumbled to that dreadful night was my friend Quintus. He was sitting in a library, looking lonesome in the lamplight, reading from a leather bound book. I went up to him, on my very last leg, and collapsed right there. My voice was thin and raspy by then, so I could only squeeze out a single plea for help. But he just frowned, and lowered his book. ‘Get out of here Atticus,’ he said, ‘it’s about time you learned to deal with your own damn problems.’”





The memory of the dream sent an anxious shiver down Atticus' spine, and with that shiver came the ghosts and skeletons clamoring their way towards his adversary.

They did not make it far, though, as the swirling fierce energy around Cynthia only hacked them to dust as she narrowed her eyes.

She conjured up more fearsome beasts and jumped to the top of the frozen fountain. But the more monsters she brought, the more Atticus felt afraid. And the more Atticus felt afraid, the stronger his magic was. The stronger his magic became, the more Cynthia hated him. The more Cynthia hated him, the more monsters she summoned.

They were like two snakes, trying to eat each other's tail. Neither really accomplishing that much.

Atticus was the first to realize the conundrum. "Look Cynthia..." he began, "I don't really have all that power you think I do. You see, I'm not really that great of an orator, and the Senate won't allow the Censor to have much power or independence, and I still have no idea what a Paphonian is. Please, just stop. We could be at this for hours."

"Shut up!" she shouted, refusing to yield.

Atticus sighed and thought back to the murky, disordered memory of his dream, and drew one last paragraph to conclude the story.

"So I was sprawled out in the Library, and the hordes of the undead were coming to get me. And it was just around then that my philosophy teacher burst in with a cup of coffee. 'What's all this mess!' he exclaimed before proceeding to scold me for letting in all those decaying bodies. 'But they're going to eat me!' I replied with dismay. 'All the more reason to clean them up,' he said, 'they probably all died from disappointing their teachers and flunking their classes. A bunch of damn delinquents.' So he handed me a broom, and made me sweep them away."



The ghosts and skeletons surged forward, and this time Cynthia could not hold them all back. They grabbed hold of the tattered edges of her dress, even as she tried to kick them back.

“Enough!” she exclaimed, jumping forward. The undead tried to hold her back, but the edges of her dress they had grabbed only ripped off.

Atticus flinched back, but he was too late to evade her. For a second a bright blob of light exploded in his eyes as she hit the side of his head. He was sent reeling, and instantly both spells were broken.

The walls and monsters disappeared, and so did the ghosts and skeletons. They were alone in the square again, except Atticus felt even more exposed now as he gingerly pressed his hand against where she hit him.

“Was that truly necessary?!” he shouted in pain.

One more hit to his gut and he was sent flying into the very real brick wall of one of the stores, all the wind knocked out of him. Atticus slid to the ground against the wall, gulping for air.

Cynthia picked up his coat and threw it at him.

“My power has been proven superior,” she said, walking back towards the embassy. “I win.”

Just as she was half-way there, she paused and glanced back at him. “And by the way, Atticus. You disgust me.”

She laughed, and continued on her way.

Atticus groaned, and pulled the coat over himself. He settled in for the night, not having the strength to move.



## Chapter Twenty Seven

### Lines in the Sand

Hunting a dangerous predator with nothing but a yoyo wasn't particularly one of Claudia's goals in life.

She had no choice but to agree to the elders' offer, after which they were quick to usher her back into the woods. They told her not to come back until nightfall or until she had killed the creature. And so there she was, no weapon supplied to her, and no idea where to look.

She scanned every tree trunk, top to bottom as she cautiously went forward.

Her journey wasn't supposed to be easy, but she hadn't expected it to be so hard either. Hopefully, she could just find that stupid Quetulan and move on.

Claudia flinched as a spider the size of her face scampered up the tree next to her.

After making a hasty retreat, she stopped, and took a swig of her canteen to quench the thirst she had built up from walking. She sighed, finding her water supply nearly depleted.

"What did I get myself into?" she asked herself, shaking her head. "I don't even have a plan to kill this thing, much less to find water."

As if in answer, she heard the muted sound of something making a splash. She jerked her head in the direction of the sound and saw there was a thick wall of brambles, ferns and saplings that way. As she walked closer, the babbling of a brook became evident, along with a somewhat familiar giggling.



She pushed her way through the saplings, avoiding the spiky brambles, and found herself at the edge of beach made from river rocks and colorful sand. In the water was Venitia, her pant legs pulled up as she leered over the surface, like a crane looking for its prey. And on the beach was Pristrix, the boy with the broken arm, using his stick to scratch lines into the sand.

“You can’t die from just getting your ankles wet,” Venitia teased the boy, motioning for him to join her.

Slowly, Claudia stepped onto the beach. The sand crunching beneath her feet was enough to alert the other two of her presence.

“Hey! It’s you!” exclaimed Venitia when she noticed her ‘intruder’. She allowed herself to fall into the creek, belly first, her arms outstretched. After a breast stroke, she jumped up on the edge of the creek in front of Claudia, grinning happily.

Claudia wondered why she had bothered to pull up her pants in the first place. Although, as she looked closer, she realized Venitia’s clothes were completely dry.

Venitia kept smiling as she took off her cap and strained the water out of her hair. “What brings you here, Paphonian. Has the council already sent you on your way? Did you get lost?”

Sighing, Claudia knelt down beside the stream and uncapped her canteen. “No. They told me that I had to kill a Quetulan in order for them to help me.”

“What?!” she exclaimed in frustrated disbelief. “I was going to kill the Quetulan. No fair!”

Claudia raised her eyebrows. “Why do you want to do that?”

“I’m in charge of the village’s security. And besides, I’d get to avenge Pristrix’s left arm, since he’s too scared of the forest to take vengeance himself.”

“She just wants to do it because she likes fighting,” said Pristrix, not replying to her allegation of cowardice.



“And I’d be fighting if it wasn’t for Mother keeping me here.” She kicked up a tuft of sand. “At least I can keep an eye on the Paphonian,” she said, putting her cap back on.

Claudia dipped her hand into the rushing water, feeling its freezing tingles as she refilled her canteen. “You know I have a name, right?”

“Maybe. Does it matter?”

“I’m Claudia,” she said, rolling her eyes as she screwed the cap on.

“Claudia the Caerulean Paphonian. Nice name.”

Venitia plopped down next to Pristrix as he continued to scratch a word into the sand. She pouted and rested her chin in her palms.

“There aren’t any fish out today, Pristrix,” she griped, “and I told mother I would bring some back for dinner so we wouldn’t have to tap into our storage before winter.”

“I’ll make one for you,” said Pristrix quietly, laying his hand on the word he had been tracing the whole time: fish.

Slowly, a bright white light arose from the sand. He dug with his fingers down into the earth glowing with heat; not flinching nor becoming singed. A lump of dirt and sand was retrieved, and he knelt forward to wash it in the river.

Claudia’s eyes grew wide in surprise as a shining glass likeness of a fish was revealed. “How did you do that?!” She could never even hope to make something that directly or that quickly with magic.

“Pristrix is the best magician in the whole wide world!” exclaimed Venitia proudly. “He can do anything! Hortensius is training him to be the patron, and when he’s done I bet nothing will scare him, not even the forest.”

Claudia noticed the touch of redness on Pristrix’s cheeks as he offered Venitia his creation. She took it, and held it up for study.



“Thanks Pristrix, but I don’t think me or my mother will be able to eat this.”

“Sorry,” he said sincerely, sulking back to where he sat before.

Venitia started playing with the glass toy in the river, splashing it around. “Hey Claudia, do you want to make a deal?”

“I’ve already made one for today; I don’t think it turned out too well.”

“I promise this one’s better. How about I help you hunt for the Quetulan? I wanted to do it anyway, and I even remember where the Quetulan was when it fell on Pristrix. We can start there.”

“Alright...” said Claudia slowly. “But would the others still honor their deal if you help me?”

“Eh,” Venitia shrugged. “Probably.”

Claudia looked hesitantly to the side. “I don’t know...”

“Oh come on. Please, please, please, please, please, please. Please! I’ll even bring the weapons,” she reached behind back and withdrew two short glass daggers from under her tunic, then two more knives from her shoes, and then a disassembled sickle from a compartment in her gauntlet, all the while giving the Caerulean pleading eyes.

“Fine,” said Claudia, stopping her before she started to pull out a collapsible spear. “I guess I could use your help.”

“Yes!” Venitia punched the air. “Thank you Claudia the Caerulean Paphonian! Together we’ll brutally slaughter the monster that threatens the village!”

“Sure,” Claudia stood up, and surveyed the thick forest around her. “Where exactly did you want to start?”

“Oh...” Venitia paused, biting her lip. She looked up to the light peeking through the canopy.



The quiet boy shook his head. "You shouldn't do it today. It will be sundown too soon, and then the forest will be dark. And when the forest is dark, it kills you."

"Sorry. But Pristrix is right," said Venitia, delicately putting her glass fish down on the sand. "Without the light there's a pretty good chance the Quetulan would brutally slaughter us instead."

"I suppose I should find a place to set up camp and—"

To Claudia's surprise, Pristrix interrupted her. "The laws of hospitality, as declared by the old gods, are alive here. Fabrina, our Matron, may not like it, but you are our guest. You can sleep by my family's hearth tonight."

"I-I wouldn't want to impose," she said uneasily. For as much as she'd slept in strange places, she had never slept in a stranger's home. Then again, sleeping outside wouldn't exactly be pleasant in the harsh cold.

"That would be no more imposing than the deal the elders offered you."

"Well, um, thank you."

Pristrix nodded; his gaze still down in the sand. He drew his finger through the loose pebbles, shifting them aimlessly.

"Then it's settled," said Venitia. "You'll stay with Pristrix and his mother for tonight, and then I'll sneak up to meet with you tomorrow morning at the crack of dawn. And we'll hunt down the monster!" She stabbed one of her knives into the ground for emphasis.

"So what do we do until sundown? The elders said I couldn't return to the village until then," said Claudia.

"Well," began Venitia. She grinned as she crossed her legs, settling into her place. "You get to tell me all about Caeruleus. I wasn't even alive the last time a Caerulean came to the village. What's it like?"

"I come from Caeruleus City, so I don't know much about what the rest of the country looks like. But there is a lot more sky,



and tall, stone buildings. Not nearly as many trees. The city is like a forest in its own right, I guess. It feels like it goes on forever, and there are so many dark crannies you never want to know. And there are monsters, like spiders and Quetulans too, but also all manners of gentle creatures that look a lot more like you and me.”

“Ah.” Venitia smiled knowingly, “and what manner of creature are you?”

Claudia shrugged. “Maybe we’ll find out tomorrow. What about you?”

“One of the carnivores, I’m sure.”

“So what’s Sylvania like?” asked Claduia. “I’m sure there must be places bigger than your village.”

“There are. I’ve just never been to them. Nobody leaves the village these days. Not since all the boys left. I would have left too if I had been old enough at the time. Not even mother would have been able to stop me, but now it’s too late. Someone has got to protect the village, and I’m the only one left.”

Claudia drew her eyebrows together curiously. “Why did all the boys leave?”

“For the war, of course,” said Venitia, as if it was obvious. She drew only blank looks from Claudia.

“I don’t think they know about the war in Caeruleus,” said Pristrix quietly.

“What?! Come on Pristrix, everybody’s heard of it. It touches everything.”

“Actually, I haven’t heard about it. Who’s Sylvania at war with? I thought you all tried to stay isolated.”

Venitia paused, slowly putting down the glass fish. “I never thought we were really that alone, though...”

“It’s a civil war,” explained Pristrix. “Hortensius told me that it didn’t really begin when they left, it’s just the latest incarnation of something born hundreds of years ago. The Veritas





Wars. All the other boys in the village went to fight, including Venitia's brother."

"You don't have to worry about it. The fights never come this far south," said Venitia bitterly. "But one day we'll win it."

"We?" asked Claudia.

"Me and Pristrix," replied Venitia simply.

"Oh..."

Ventia jumped to her feet. "Well, I still need to catch a fish. Why don't you and Pristrix brainstorm battle strategies in the meantime?" she suggested, tucking her glass pet under her arm and heading downstream.

Claudia watched as she disappeared from view, leaving her with the boy with his head in the sand.

"You couldn't have a finer hunting partner than Venitia," said Pristrix, now that she was gone.

"Good to know."

He nodded, allowing silence to spread in the air above the brook's thin noise.

Claudia shifted uneasily. "If it's alright for me to ask...Venitia said that you were a really good magician. That you're training to become a Patron. Could you do the spell to find out who made me?"

"No."

"Care to elaborate?" she asked flatly.

"It's easy to manipulate the physical world with magic. All patrons have to know how to do that. What's harder, much more delicate, is when you try to use magic on either the mind or other magic. Things get complicated. Convoluted. The possibility for catastrophic results is introduced. Hortensius is still only teaching me the basics."

"Why do things get complicated? I mean, what's so different about using magic on stuff like that?"



Pristrix closed his eyes, and began tracing a new word into the sand. “Because magic is an act of defiance against the nature of the universe. And it’s the same thing as our mind. Regular magic is like molding clay, magic against magic must be like a conversation, where both sides must touch the other and ask for information. True manipulation of another’s mind or magic is impossible.”

“But I’m not mind or magic. I’m real, and alive,” said Claudia. She wasn’t sure she understood everything he was going on about.

“Maybe now you are. But at first you were just an odd thought in your creator’s mind. Hortensius and the elders must find that thought to help you.”

Claudia sighed. “Well, I guess that really does boil down my existence.”

Pristrix shrugged, “The same’s true for all of humanity.”

“So what magic that affects magic have you learned?”

He quickly erased the word he was working on. “Give me your hand.”

“Um...why?”

“To show you.”

Slowly, Claudia extended her open hand forward. Pristrix took it, one hand beneath hers, the other tracing an indiscernible word onto her palm, sending shivers through her. He never met her questioning gaze, but once his word was complete, he pressed his palm against hers.

A warm tingle crawled up her arm, slithered across her shoulders, wound itself around her neck, and then surged through her head. That was when she started to truly feel it.

It was hot, yet dull, throbbing, but restrained, and so close she could feel it on the hairs of her arm but not on her skin. Darkness filled her eyes interspersed with periods of electric color. The darkness was frightening, but the color gave brief reprieves of safety.



Eventually, the colors morphed into a consistent shape and she saw Venitia. She was smiling a reassuring smile, sitting by the banks of the creek. And at the sight of her, she was flooded with the same mix of feeling as before, but tenfold stronger. In that moment, she felt the warmest part of the forest winter, a stirring of passion, and the safety of a warm blanket.

The feeling lingered for a moment, then it went cold. Her eyes snapped open, and she jerked her hands back. There was a thick blush across her face.

Pristrix only sat back, not reacting.

“Y-you...you showed me your love for Venitia?” She rubbed the palm he touched, as if to wipe something dirty away.

Paradoxically, it was as if she had been violated to see something so private of his. She wasn’t sure if her blush was one of shame or not.

He only nodded.

“Why?”

“I needed a strong emotion. This one was the easiest.”

“Yeah. It was very strong,” she paused, realizing exactly what he had done. “So, you can transmit emotions using magic. That’s what Hortensius taught you?”

“As long as the emotion is strong enough, a magician can tear down not just the barriers between his mind and reality, but the barrier of reality between his mind and another’s. You could probably do it if you tried.”

“But wouldn’t it be...you know...a little bit of an intimate experience?”

“Yes.”

“And you don’t find anything awkward about that?”

“No. As long as the feelings being transmitted are not about the person they’re being transmitted to.”

“Would you show Venitia what you showed me?”

“No. She is not aware of my sentiments.”



“Don’t you want her to know?”

Pristrix smiled, almost amused. “In case you weren’t listening to Venitia: I am, first and foremost, a coward.”



## Chapter Twenty Eight

### The Quetulan

Claudia sat up with a start, pushing the fur blanket off her chest, her eyes shooting wild glances around the strange place where she'd woken up. It took her a moment to remember where she was, and why she was there.

She was inside Pristrix's brown cube of a home, in between his bed and his mother's. It was warm inside, even though there was no fire or other heat source to keep it that way. It was magic, just like many things in the village.

She had returned to Frixfrox last night to see Pristix's mother gardening with tools that caused weeds to wither away when they touched them, and then cook dinner on a slab of stone that Pristrix only needed to tap to make hot, and light their abode with a smear of luminescent magic on the ceiling. Most of their magical devices were made by Pristrix, they had explained, for the sake of his practice, while nearly everyone else had theirs manufactured by Hortensius.

Now, both Pristrix and his mother, Petalia, were gone from their beds. Usually, Claudia woke whenever the sun came up and the sky turned blue, but here, without proper windows, she had slept in. She shook herself, and got to her feet. She didn't know how late she had slept; she had to get to Venitia before she decided to go hunting on her own.

Glancing both ways to ensure she was alone, she quickly changed her clothes, stuffing her old ones in her bag. She decided she would leave the bag there for now, so when she stepped out into the light of day she only had the worn-out clothes of the



Anarchists, her red bandanna, and her yoyo. With the eyes of the Sylvanians pressing on her back, she strode into the forest, going to the river to meet her new partner in conflict.

Just as she expected, Pristrix was there, but so was his mother Petalia, and Fabrina the matron. The two mothers were in the river, washing blankets and furs, and when they were done they were tossed on the beach where Pristrix had scratched a word with his stick that swiftly dried them all.

“Venitia is just so stubborn! Once she gets attached to a foolish idea she’ll never let it go,” said Fabrina, scrubbing her blanket with frustration. “Ever since the mail stopped coming, she keeps talking about how she’ll go after her brother. And when she’s not talking about that she’s going on about how she’s going to go hunt the Quetulan on her own. It’s nothing short of a miracle that filthy Paphonian came when she did-”

Claudia cleared her throat.

Fabrina froze, and frowned at the sight of her. “Come on Petalia,” she said, gathering up the blankets. “I think we’re just about done.”

She began to walk briskly back to the village sending Claudia a dirty look on her way. Petalia followed silently behind her.

After she was sure the mothers were out of hearing distance, Claudia turned to Pristrix. “Where’s Venitia? Did she go already?”

He shook his head. “Wait and she will come.”

“I wish you had woken me up earlier,” said Claudia sitting down on a fallen log.

“You will need to be well rested for the hunt.”

Claudia sighed. He was probably right.

She peered into a small break in the brambles across the stream. It already looked so dark and foreboding. The shadows dared her to enter their veil and challenge their pets.



She began to wonder if she was really ready for the hunt ahead. But before she could come up with an answer to that quandary, something slammed against her back.

She yelped as she was pushed to the ground. While she scrambled to get standing and ready to fight, she realized that her attacker was not the Quetulan, but once again just Venitia.

“What was that for?!”

“Not to worry, Claudia the Caerulean Paphonian!” said Venitia proudly. “Just making sure you know I’ll always have the drop on you. I’m a master of stealth!”

“...I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Never mind keeping it! We have to get going. I thought we should start at the fig grove. That’s where the Quetulan attacked Pristrix. It’s too bad we missed the last bit of fig season. Hortensius wouldn’t let anyone go near there after it happened.”

“You will need a weapon,” said Pristrix quietly. He put the last touches on a new word in the sand, and then closed his eyes as he put his hand against it.

It glowed brighter than all the times before. Claudia and Venitia were forced to look away.

When his magic was done he dug a long narrow object from the ground. The form, revealed as he washed it in the river, was that of a Caerulean Gladius. Two feet long, double edged, with a triangular point designed for stabbing, to kill as efficiently as possible. The blade was made from deep, murky green glass.

Pristrix lifted the sword, letting it cast odd distortions of light all across the sand.

“Careful. It’s sharp,” he told her.

Claudia examined the weapon, picking it up by the hilt. As she looked through the smooth green surface, she realized that Pristrix was looking back at her. For the first time she saw his eyes, and though she couldn’t discern their color through the glass, she



could tell that both his pupils and irises were the same bright block of color.

Through the sword, she understood he was entrusting her with something more important to him than anything else: Venitia's safety.

"Thank you," she said graciously.

"The forest is dangerous," he reminded her, sitting back down and returning his gaze to the ground.

Venitia impatiently grabbed Claudia's arm. "Come one, let's get started. No time to dawdle!"

Claudia found herself dragged in the general direction of the forest

"Be back soon!" called Venitia to Pristrix as she leaped across the stream, followed soon after by Claudia. "Don't tell anyone where we went!"

The two girls entered the raw wilderness. Claudia tightened her grip on the hilt of her new sword, knowing she was about to find what she was looking for or get maimed trying.

It wasn't long before the sound of rushing water faded from her ears.

"How far away is this fig grove?" asked Claudia.

"Oh, not too far. Don't worry, I know the way." Venitia casually slipped out a shiny knife from under her tunic.

"Those glass knives you had, Pristrix made them, right?"

"Yup! He really likes making things out of glass. I have a bunch of stuff he made at home. I just wish he wasn't so afraid of the forest. We could have so much fun! But he's always saying how the forest is *dangerous*. It isn't really that bad. We can't live our whole lives in the village anyway. It's too small."

"I don't think you should blame Pristrix too much. Especially after what that Quetulan did to him."

"It wasn't just the Quetulan," said Venitia. "He was like that for as long as I can remember. When we were younger either me





or his mother had to drag him into the woods just to get food. One time a rabbit ran past him and it scared him so much that he fell backwards, right on top of a firebird that had been napping in the ferns. It gave him a scar on his neck,” said Venitia. She swung her knife carelessly back and forth in the air. “I just wish he was brave enough to come with me more often.”

“Aren’t you worried your mother will find out about this?”

“Nah,” she replied, waving her gauntlet hand dismissively. “I’m not afraid of her. She just gets really annoying when I do this kind of stuff. But I think this time it will be worth it.”

“I heard her talking about your brother—”

“Really?” asked Venitia, sounding surprised. “She never talks about him in front of me...”

“She said you wanted to go join him in the war.”

“Yeah. I mean it would be nice. But Frixfrox needs me too much. I’m the only one left who’s actually trained and ready to fight. Ever since the mail stopped coming, I think they need me even more. Because now it feels like we are actually alone in the world. They need Pristrix too, and I would never leave without him.”

“Why?” Claudia’s thoughts immediately went to what he had shown her the day before. She glanced briefly to Venitia, her blush coming back.

“You can’t win a war without a magician. I don’t know how you guys fight in Caeruleus. But here there are always two battles going when armies go at it. You have the ground warriors and their generals up against the enemy warriors and generals. And then you have the war magicians. Fighting with another magician is supposed to be the most difficult feat of magic there is. But I’m sure Pristrix could handle it, and not even go insane like most of the others.”

“Well...that’s sweet...”



“Eh. Being sweet is for pomegranates. What I say to Pristrix and to my mother, and to you now, I guess, is that we shouldn’t be afraid. Not of the forest. Not of armies. Not of the Quetulan. We’re the real predators after all.”

Claudia smiled. Venitia had something she could admire. In such a small village, in the middle of an impossibly large forest she was a girl, who cut her hair short and wore a gauntlet, determined to fight the world for no other reason but to win. Her fighting spirit reminded her a little of the Anarchists. And somehow, that made her feel more comfortable.

She wondered if this was the reason Pristrix liked her so much. She wasn’t sure. But she would completely understand if it was.

Suddenly, Claudia heard a crunch under her foot. She stopped. Slowly, she stepped back, revealing a crushed, bleached vertebrae.

She looked up and realized in a stroke of horror there were hundreds of dirty bones all across the grove, just under the surface of leaves or in the shadows of the fig trees. This was the hunting ground of the Quetulan.

She held her gladius tighter, hoping it would summon strength and courage.

They were on the edge of the fig grove. The shorter trees blocked the trunks of the taller trees, giving the beast an unfair advantage.

The fig trees had an inherent alienness to them. The roots were spread across the forest floor like a mass of snakes frozen in wood, leaving a structure full of hollow niches and crevices. A few common pine trees had cropped up in certain parts, sprinkling discarded needles among the shriveling figs and wooden snakes.

“This is the place,” said Venitia, marching on in. “Keep your eyes on the tree trunks.”



Claudia reluctantly stepped past the first fig tree and tried not to be too distracted by the long claw mark scratched across the bark.

“Quetulans are very opportunistic creatures,” said Venitia, meandering from tree to tree, peering up the trunks. “But once they commit to something they get very stubborn about it. So we probably won’t have to worry about it running away. Just have your sword at the ready. If it lands on you, and you don’t manage to kill it immediately, I’ll probably be able to get to you in time.”

Claudia glanced over to her ventress companion and froze. A chill went up her spine.

There, on the trunk just above Venitia’s head, was the Quetulan.

It was almost as big as she was. Its skin was brown and rough, although it might not have been skin but actually scales in brown little tiles like pine bark. Its face looked like a gibbous moon with cat eyes and a flat nose. Its mouth was open, baring two rows of pointed, crooked teeth like stakes and spears which were stuck haphazardly out of the creature’s mouth. Along its forearms were sharp blades made from the same stuff as its claws, as if it had a thin curved sword strapped to its arm.

“Something wrong?” asked Venitia, seeing that Claudia had stopped.

The Quetulan let go of the tree.

“Look out!” Claudia shouted.

Venitia glanced up, but wasn’t able to bring up her dagger quick enough.

The Quetulan pushed her to the ground, raising its claw to deal the fatal blow.

Before it could, Claudia swung her Gladius as hard as she could, hitting the horrid creature on the side of its raised forearm blade, throwing it off. However the swing wasn’t enough to cut through the Quetulan’s natural armor. The attack only irritated it.



The Quatulán hissed as Venitia jumped to her feet with her dagger raised. It circled them, looking for an opening to attack, refusing to walk away from their challenge.

Tooth. Claw. Dagger. Sword. Predator. Prey. All collided in the forest's battle.

The Quetulán attacked Venitia again. Leaping forward, its blade forearm sliced her shoulder. But she was able to block its claws reaching for her throat with her gauntlet, and thrust her dagger forward at its unprotected belly.

Claudia hit the creature off again, still not able to penetrate its armor. But as the Quetulán turned to hiss at her, Venitia attacked. She plunged her knife down, squarely into its neck.

And though it squirmed, and lashed out, its fate was sealed. Venitia had killed it.

The defeated enemy twitched once more, its rich red blood flowed out onto the forest floor.

Venitia laughed, and leaned against a fig tree to get her breath. "That wasn't so hard, now was it?"

Claudia let down her sword, resting the tip against the ground. "Yeah... I guess it wasn't."

She smiled, feeling the adrenaline fueled excitement give way to a building sense of victory.

She was going to find out who made her! She really was!

Just then, Claudia noticed Venitia staring at something behind her.

"What is it?" asked Claudia, turning around.

A new Quetulán had jumped to the ground, snarling viciously at the humans.

Then a second. Then a fourth. Then a fifth...

More and more kept coming from the trees above, landing on all four claws or crawling down the trunks. Until finally, there were eleven.

A pack.



## Chapter Twenty Nine

### The Duties of a Tribune

Quintus loved the swiveling chair in his office. Sometimes, when he was alone and stuck in the middle of slugging through his paperwork, he gave it a spin. He would smile a tad as the world turned to a swirling blur, and he could forget about the weight of the country on his head.

He had been sworn in as Tribune two days ago. Even before then, he had been given a tour of the People's Department by the old Tribune. His first day was a mess of getting his stuff into his office, taking paperwork, and making sure he knew the name of everybody in the Department.

His office, once removed of the giant portrait of his predecessor and his awards, was a simple thing. Quintus liked it that way. The only wall made of sapphire was the one behind him, and on the other side of the room were the doors that lead to his secretaries' desks and the rest of the People's Department. The walls in between were painted a flat brown color that would have looked gloomy if it weren't for the bright electric light fixtures.

Since becoming a Tribune he had left his dorm and moved back into his old room at his Dad's. He had packed up all his stuff as well as Atticus' so he wouldn't have to worry about it when he got back.

Now, every day, he had breakfast with his father before taking one of the cable cars to the Senate Building. He liked it, but it was a big change from campus life with Atticus.

Unfortunately, he had bigger problems than adjusting to his new job. He was expecting a visitor any moment now.



This particular man was very difficult to get a hold of. After searching through tax records for several hours and finding nothing, he eventually had to go down to the Department of Justice to locate where they were sending his court summons. He had considered waiting until Atticus returned to get the ball rolling on his plan, but in the end he decided time was of the essence.

He spun himself in his chair idly, wondering how his strategy would pan out.

When he heard knock on his door he stopped in mid spin, and stood up.

“Come in,” he called.

The door opened to reveal an uncertain looking secretary. “Um...sorry to disturb you, Tribune Aurelius, but there is a Felix Catulli here to see you. He claims he has an appointment but I don’t have anything on your schedule...”

“Ah yes. Thank you, Sestia. Send him in.”

She hesitated. “Are you sure we shouldn’t call the Praetorian Guard? That’s what Tribune Cornelius did whenever he showed up.”

Quintus furrowed his brow. “Just let him in.”

She stepped back out, and after a moment, the expected man entered.

He looked scruffy, wearing worn out jeans and a thick blue cotton shirt with oil stains on it. Despite his appearance, Quintus knew that the man he was looking at would prove invaluable if he could win his favor.

Quintus walked around to the front of his desk and held his hand out.

“It’s an honor, Mr. Catulli,” he said warmly.

“I suppose I should say likewise, Tribune Aurelius,” he said, shaking the hand offered to him.



He eyed Quintus with a certain unease, as if he didn't trust his motives. "I must admit. Your letter took me by surprise. I was hardly on friendly terms with your predecessor. Actually, as far as I know, I'm not on friendly terms with anyone in the government. The Praetorian Guards made a particularly violent point of telling me not to return to this building last time I was here."

"Yes, I'm sorry you had to suffer through that," said Quintus. "I actually heard about your activities from a rather curious aside the former Tribune made. But that's irrelevant. The reason I asked you here was so that I could help you."

"To help me?" asked Felix incredulously.

Quintus nodded.

"And what do you want in return?"

"Your special set of skills. You see, I am in need of an organizer. A leader of men. After looking into your record, and your history, I believe you are just the right man for the job."

Felix crossed his arms skeptically. "And who says I'm going to accept this help of yours?"

"Oh, this is you helping me to help you some more. What I need to do is pass the most radical labor laws I can push onto the Senate docket. "

"Really?"

"Yes sir. But first, how about a little assistance in a more immediate crisis. I understand that you are attempting to organize a strike at a Salvius conglomerate factory."

"It's already organized. I was going to meet with a few workers and the management once I was done here."

"Excellent!" said Quintus, reaching behind himself and pulling out a briefcase from the side of his desk. "Mind if I join you?"

Felix shifted a suspicious gaze to the briefcase. "What's in this for you?"



“Nothing you should worry about. But with any luck, it will make several crusty old senators very angry.”

Felix sighed. “You can come along if you like. But I’m not sure I can give you the kind of help you want.”

“That’s fine. I needed to stretch my legs anyway,” said Quintus, opening the door Felix. “This factory is on the edge of the Industrial district, isn’t it?”

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After about a twenty five minute journey, they arrived to find two young boys waiting for them in front of the seemingly empty factory. Their clothes were ragged, and dirty; they couldn’t have been older than thirteen. Quintus was quick to notice thick bags under their eyes from lack of sleep, reminding him of Atticus. They were talking among themselves, but stopped as soon as they saw Felix.

“Thanks for coming,” said Felix as he walked up to them. “Are they waiting inside?”

The two kids nodded. “Pompeious and the Factory Manager too, just like they promised,” said one.

Quintus regarded the boys curiously. “And who are you two?”

“They are Philo and Rufus, the workers I told you about,” replied Felix, motioning to one, then the other.

“But...they’re so young.”

Philo crossed his arms indignantly. “I’m the oldest kid in the factory. I’m not that young.”

“Kids. Kids work here?” asked Quintus incredulously. He turned to look at the bleak, grey looking factory. “What started this strike anyway?”





“The same way all the strikes I organize begin. Somebody died on the job. A little girl, in fact, just a few days earlier,” said Felix.

“And why isn’t this all over the front page of the news? The only reason I knew about this was because I always read page 15b of the Avian Hill Journal for the blurb on *This Day in History*.”

“Because Pompious was the owner of a media conglomerate before he bought the factories when the previous owner died. It’s also because I haven’t gone to any of the newspapers yet. Hopefully I can get this sorted out before the parents have to get involved.”

“Felix promised everyone sweet bread if they didn’t show up today,” Rufus chimed in.

“A baker owed me a pretty big favor. But something tells me he would have helped anyway, Agricola is just like that.”

“Agricola, as in the failed candidate to be Praetor?”

“The very same,” Felix adjusted his blue collar, “But let’s not dawdle. It’s time to get down to business.”

Felix and the two boys lead the way into the factory, and Quintus followed just behind.

It was a paradoxically chaotic and organized place inside. The machines were in neat rows with the spindles and the spools set above them. Crisscrossed and laced across the ceiling were hundreds of miles of Serca thread like the webs of a dozen giant spiders. It was the fine material that made the clothes Quintus-and a thousand others-wore.

But what he noticed on the dirty and grimy floor gave him pause.

It was a blood stain. Someone had obviously tried to clean it, since it was the only spot without dirt, but they hadn’t managed to hide it. There was a sick feeling growing in his stomach.

He stopped and watched as Felix engaged the factory owner and the two managers on either side of him.



Pompeius had a scowl on his face. “You just can never leave me alone, can you Felix? You always have to come back here and deliver your self-righteous tirades.”

“A little girl died,” replied Felix flatly.

“Do you mean the one last week? Or the one four years ago? I’m sure we both know which one is the reason you’re actually here.”

“I’m sorry,” said Quintus, stepping forward. “What was that you were saying about a girl dying four years ago?”

“My daughter,” Felix said quietly. “She died here four years ago, the same way.”

“And while that’s all very tragic, I’m sure, it doesn’t give you the right to interfere here every time an accident happens. This is a free enterprise, and more importantly, none of your business.”

Felix blinked with disbelief. “I’m not sure if you knew this...but that’s pretty much the entirety of my business.”

“How did this girl die, precisely?” asked Quintus, his eyes wandering back to the red stain.

“Her job was to change the spools above the machines. She fell from the top of the ladder and into the spinners,” said Philo, his voice suddenly distant. “We tried to help her, but nobody knew what to do.”

“Hey, who are you anyway?” asked Pompeius, motioning flippantly to Quintus. “Their lawyer?”

“Something like that,” he replied.

“Look, I just want you to make this place safe for these kids. That’s all I want,” said Felix.

“Your suggestions will be taken into consideration,” said one of the factory managers coldly.

“Yes, and now I suggest, and advise you to get out before the Praetorian Guards come. This is private property. And you two



kids are going to leave with him or else you're both fired," said Pompeius.

"If you will excuse me, Mr. Popmpeius," said Quintus, stepping in front of Felix and the boys. "But, these three here are currently consultants with the Department of Revenue. And neither you nor the Praetorian Guard have the authority to escort them off the premises as they are helping me with my investigation."

The managers exchanged worried glances, but Pompeius smiled with understanding.

"Oh, so you're not a lawyer. You're just some sleazy bureaucrat. I don't know how much Felix here spent to bribe you, but like I said, the Praetorian Guard should be here soon."

Quintus lightly scratched the back of his neck and put on a mockingly apologetic face. "Sorry I skipped the introduction. But you were right, I'm not really a lawyer, you see, my name is Quintus Aurelius, the Tribune of the Plebs."

Pompeius's face paled instantly.

"You should also know," continued Quintus holding up his briefcase, "that I had the tax records pulled for your conglomeration, just in case I found it necessary to file an audit or two. The astounding fact that a complete failure in safety has existed for the past four years is certainly something I find highly unusual for an entity that makes, what was it...thirty nine million Sesterces in profit a year? Should I check the specifics? It's in here somewhere."

Pompeius's face quickly turned from one lacking blood to one full of it. "I beg you to reconsider, Tribune Aurelius. This is my business here. What I do for a living. What Felix is asking will cost thousands of Sesterces. Sesterces that will most likely come out of the paychecks of kids like Philo and Rufus. Businesses like mine can't work under the pressure of people like him."



Quintus raised his eyebrows. “Well, Mr. Pompeius, I assure you it is just as easy for me to look through your own tax records as it was for your conglomerate. I am willing to bet that such an insignificant amount can come out of your paycheck. And as far as business goes, I am the Tribune of the Plebs, people are my business. Please don’t interfere with my business, Mr. Pompeius.”

Pompeius fell into a stunned silence for a moment.

“Sir?” asked one of the factory managers, waiting for his decision.

Pompeius narrowed his eyes. “Fine. I’ll do what Felix wants. But don’t think you’re so far above me, in your crystal palace. Because you’re not, *Tribune* Aurelius. You’re new to this job, right? Well, there are people in the senate building who might object to the way you are conducting your *business*. Don’t expect to be able to keep this up.”

Quintus shrugged. “Sounds like my problem to deal with.”

He turned nonchalantly and began walking towards the door. “Why don’t you all draft up some sort of agreement. I’ll be waiting to have a word with those Praetorian Guards you called.”

Once he was out of the factory, Quintus took a nice long breath of the thick, fume-laced air of the Industrial District and set down the briefcase. He could really get used to this job.

After a few minutes of waiting, Felix and the boys came to join him.

“That was...really something you pulled back there,” said Felix, his eyes set quizzically on Quintus’ face.

“Ehh, Pompeius had it coming. But you can also consider it an act of good faith if you want.”

“So, what was that plan you were talking about earlier? The one you need my help with,” he asked.

“I’m glad you asked-” Quintus paused as he felt Rufus tugging on his sleeve.



“Does this mean we’re going back to work today?” asked the boy.

Quintus shook his head.

Looking down at the kid, he saw a familiar injustice in the exhaustion in his face. And he would be damned if he didn’t do something about it.

“No,” he said, looking the boy in his young, tired eyes. “Go home and get some rest.”



## Chapter Thirty

### An Oration in Self-defense

The first thing that met his senses as he woke up was the smell of grilling meat. Atticus groaned as he tried to move. Everything felt so sore.

He opened his eyes and pushed himself into a sitting position. The thin warmth of a nearby fire was the only comfort since his coat-turned-blanket had provided little protection from the cold night air. This foreign heat emanated from the sandwich stand beside him, where Tiberius was grilling chicken and peacock.

“Ah you’re awake,” he said with a smile. “You looked cold, so I thought it might help if I turned on the grill over here. Here, this will probably help too.” He offered him a black metal thermos.

Atticus took a sip: it was hot apple cider. The golden liquid poured some life back into his body. Unfortunately, that also meant he had begun to feel the throbbing bruise on his midsection where Cynthia had kicked him. He took another gulp.

“Thanks,” he croaked.

“Yeah. I saw what happened last night from my window and felt pretty bad about it. Cynthia can land some really serious blows if she wants to.”

“What, did she hit you?” asked Atticus, holding the warm thermos close to his body.

“Oh no. She only attacks people she hates. She doesn’t hate me. I’m just Tiberius, the guy who sells sandwiches. I’m too small for her to hate.”



Atticus glanced to the door Cynthia had broken down yesterday as he began to rub the thermos against his cheek. “Not to sound ungrateful for the cider. But do you really love this girl who violently attacks people and causes indiscriminate chaos?”

A small line began to form for the sandwiches, mostly people who worked in the embassy getting breakfast before heading to work, and Tiberius tended to the customers without taking his attention away from Atticus.

“Well...I can’t really deny those claims. And, she does seem to have a bone to pick with you in particular. But I will say that she is also much more than that. She provides something that isn’t really normal to this town. With her magic, and her troublemaking she brings something I think is really amazing and big in this otherwise small and mundane world of mine.”

“But that’s not really who she is, is it? That’s just what she does.” Atticus pointed out.

“Oh, I know who she is too. I understand her rage, and everything that riles her up and why she does those things to mess with people. It’s not that hard to understand. I just hope that one day I can help her be content with the world,” replied Tiberius.

“Yeah...good luck with that.” Atticus winced as he got to his feet and put his coat back on. He handed the thermos back to Tiberius.

“Here, take one on the house.” Tiberius extended a sandwich wrapped in wax paper to him.

“What kind?” asked Atticus.

“Pavonum on wheat with cheese.”

“Thank you. Although...I don’t really know why you’re giving it to me.”

Tiberius smiled. “Someone’s gotta clean up Cynthia’s messes. And on that note, I would advise you try to keep your distance from her. As much as I like to see her magic in action, I don’t like to see her angry.”



"I'll do my best," said Atticus, trudging on towards the Embassy. He stopped and picked up his revolver from where it had fallen the night before on his way back.

He found his father and mother in the dining room eating breakfast. Cynthia and Decens were there too.

All eyes were on him as he took his seat and began to unwrap his sandwich, ignoring the other food on the table.

"Looks like you had a rough night, son," commented Valens through a mouthful of bacon.

Atticus nodded silently.

"What happened?" asked Carmen.

Atticus glanced briefly to Cynthia. "...sometimes I have a hard time getting to sleep."

"Well, regardless, you shouldn't have gone out so late. You'll catch a cold that way," said Carmen.

Cynthia sent a frosty glare towards Atticus, but his eyes were now set squarely on his sandwich.

She was using Valens' old knife as a fork to pick apple slices and drop them into her mouth.

Valens tried to grab it but paused half way through, and looked at his hand curiously. He held it out in front of his eyes and waved it back and forth.

"Something wrong?" asked Atticus.

"No, it's nothing. I think I've just gotten a little tired," he replied, forgetting about the knife and returning his attention to his plate.

"You shouldn't be eating that greasy stuff for breakfast," Carmen continued, gesturing towards Atticus. "I bet you get that from your father. And it'll be the death of both of you."

"You might just have a point there, honey," said Valens. He let out a small groan and rapped his fist against his chest. "I think I need some stomach tablets."





He stood up, and began making his way to the door, one hand clutching his belly. He only made it a few steps before he collapsed.

“Valens!” exclaimed Carmen.

She was by his side in an instance, and both Atticus and Decens shot up in their seats. Cynthia watched quietly with an unreadable gaze.

It all went so quickly, Atticus wasn’t sure what was happening. They brought Valens to his bed. He breathing was sporadic, and his heart rate irregular.

The staff from both halves of the embassy had crowded themselves into the hall, trying to peek in through the doorway of his bedroom. Atticus was the only one sitting down, in a chair up against the wall.

Carmen was kneeling by her husband’s side, holding the back of his bald head in her hands.

Decens stood solemnly on the other side of the bed. “I’m sorry, but Adia already left for Sylvania. And since she’s been serving as the town’s doctor after the last one passed, I had your staff telegraph for the physician in the Taberinus. But I fear he won’t be here until tomorrow.”

Cynthia was leaning up against the wall opposite Atticus, her expression was blank. She had placed Valens’ knife on his night stand.

Carmen nodded with a sad smile. “You hear that Valens, you are going to be alright. You are going to be alright. Just hang in there for a little while.” Atticus could hear the tears gathering in her eyes through her voice.

Just then, Cynthia left, the embassy staffers parting like water for her. Atticus glanced to her leaving form, then to his father, then back to her. After a moment of hesitation, he stood up and followed.



She walked through the halls, not looking back, leading him to parts of the building he had yet to see, until finally she slipped into a plain looking door. Upon entering, Atticus saw it was the kitchen.

Cynthia stood on the far side, a shiny metal table and many pots hanging from the ceiling in between them. She had a long steak knife; she stared at it while she turned it over in her hands.

"I didn't do anything to harm your father," she spoke preemptively.

"That doesn't matter," replied Atticus. "I've seen how good you are with magic. I want you to fix him."

She laughed. "Why don't you do it? He's your father."

"I have no idea what would happen if I tried to use magic on him! Mom's always writing about how you people use magic for everything, you know how, don't you?"

Cynthia narrowed her eyes, and threw the knife.

Atticus ducked, and the knife bounced harmlessly off a pasta pot.

"I don't have to do anything for you, Censor Permisc!" she sneered, taking more knives from a holder and hurling them without really aiming.

Atticus didn't move from his place hunched beneath the table until she stopped. Slowly, he rose back up to face her.

"You know, somehow, I bet you deserved this. Maybe there is some divine retribution in the world after all," she said, throwing her last knife for good measure. It imbedded itself in a loaf of bread behind him.

She started to make towards another knife holder.

"Stop it!" shouted Atticus, rage building in his chest.

She paused, "What, are you going to make me?" She continued to reach forward.

"Fine! You're right! You win!" he exclaimed, not in surrender, but in frustration.



She allayed her hand, and looked back to him.

"I've used what I was taught to manipulate people. To do things that weren't really legal, or ethical. I know the issue of using rhetoric without wisdom and I know where I failed. But do you know what, Cynthia?" he asked, pointing an accusing finger at her. "I never raised my fist or my words to harm a single soul. I will never claim to be a moral authority. But I refuse to be an epitome of unvirtue. At the very least I don't strike and terrorize strangers! At least I don't use my own pain and suffering to excuse making other people miserable!"

Cynthia glowered at him. "...I don't like you."

"I don't care what you like. I barely know you."

She crossed her arms stubbornly. "I'm not going to help."

"Alright..." said Atticus, something icy in his voice. "But if he dies, know that this was on you too!" He stormed out of the kitchen.

Atticus knew what he had to do. If it didn't work, and he regretted it for the rest of his life, then so be it.

After walking back to his father's room, he squirmed through the ranks of embassy staffers. Nothing had changed since he'd left, but instead of sitting back in the chair against the wall, he knelt by his mother's side, and took his father's hand.

Valens didn't look peaceful. Even though he wasn't conscious, there was something subtly distressing about his face, as if there were just one or two muscles pulled too taut. It didn't look like his father's face. But then, it hadn't looked like his face to Atticus since he'd arrived.

"Now that I think about it, this is probably the first time I've seen him ill," said Atticus, tilting his head. "It's not right."

Carmen stared mutely at her husband.

"You know, I remember this one time when you two brought me to the museum of mythic history. Where they had the sculptures of all the stuff you only ever hear about in the old



stories. They had the Quetulan and the Serpent built to scale, Veritas with her dark blue, star speckled skin, Mintiri as a tall, thin shadow, they even had a special exhibit on Somnium and his ivory wife receiving a blessing from Amores. That one really fascinated me for some reason, so I stopped and stared at it for a long while. Didn't even notice that you two had gone on with the tour," said Atticus. He closed his eyes, and reveled in the childhood memory.

"When I looked around, all the people around me had changed and I didn't recognize any of them. So I started to wander about; I wasn't too worried at first. I just kept looking at all the sculptures, and shuffled back and forth. The feeling of being lost set in slowly, and then hit all at once. And when I really felt it, it was like falling into space. So I began to walk a bit quicker, and I was pretty afraid as I looked through the crowd, trying to find you two." Atticus sent his mother a sparing smile.

A gentle glow began to emanate from Atticus and Valen's hands. And as it grew, so did the room, revealing the shadowy figures of a moving crowd and tall stone statues.

Decens squinted his eyes, and observed the change with a passive curiosity. Carmen, once she noticed, gasped, and turned to Atticus to see what he was doing. He only continued with the story.

"I was close to panicking when I fast walked into the exhibit of Vita and Virtus, and found you both there, discussing how the story was passed down through oral tradition with the tour guide. I ran up and wrapped my arms around Dad's waist, and he patted my head. I don't think you guys had figured out I had gone missing, but I wasn't about to tell you since it would just make me look foolish. Besides, I was safe again. I really felt safe."

The shadows all faded away, and the bright red forms of the young Permisc family were all that was left. They watched over their older versions, wondering what would become of them.



“You guys took me to the gift shop at the end, and after a lot of pestering I convinced dad to buy me that collection of old poetry and myths, right on the cover it said “Myths Every Child Should Know,” and I really took that cover to heart. I felt an overwhelming pride as I learned how to recite them all by heart, and I believed it made you two proud when I read them aloud by memory before bed, and you’d compare me to the old bards. And dad would explain just how they had preserved the stories through that oral tradition, since the times of the gods’ operas.”

Atticus smiled, and placed his and Valens’ hands onto his father’s chest. The young red images of the Permiscs’ walked closer.

“I liked him much better like that. When he was home, with hair, and listening to those old stories. This isn’t right. Not right at all. It’s too soon to go to sleep. I only just got here.”

The light from their hands flared once, and the reflections of the Permiscs walked forward, and slipped into their older bodies.

Valens’ likeness laid down entered his physical body, and all was still for a moment.

“Come on...wake up,” Atticus whispered.

Slowly, Valen’s eyes fluttered open, and he moaned.

“Were...were you saying something Atticus? I’m sorry I wasn’t paying attention.”

Carmen embraced her son with elation. Atticus stayed still in her arms. “Thank you, sweetie,” she whispered.

Valens tried to sit up in the bed, but Decens stopped him. “What happened?” he asked, confused. Decens began to explain the situation as best he could.




Carmen let Atticus go. “Why didn’t you tell us you were a magician?”

He stood up. “It didn’t matter.” He looked down to his father. “I’m going to go back to Caeruleus City, but I’ll stop in



Tabernicus to make sure the doctor comes right away. Honestly, I don't know what I did, how well it worked, or how long it will last."

He started walking towards the door, but stopped just before he left. "Send me a letter when you can," he called back to them.



## Chapter Thirty One

### The Paphonian and the Ventress

The monsters showed their teeth and growled at the two who had murdered their fellow Quetulan. The rules of the hunter and the hunted were all off now that the two former hunters were hopelessly outnumbered.

Venitia struck a defensive pose. “Don’t try to run!” she shouted. “They’re faster than us. We’ll have to fight.”

Claudia eyes glanced frantically from beast to beast. Her heart picked up pace. “I won’t run,” she promised. It was too late to turn back.

She had come to realize, as she gripped the sword handle tighter, that there existed a point when a person’s passionate need could shape them into a jagged edged weapon, and she was far past that point.

The Quetulans prowled closer.

One of the braver, more audacious ones leapt towards Claudia. She kicked it squarely across the nose, sending it sprawling to the side.

Venitia took a very offensive approach to her defense: jutting her gauntlet into the mouth of the first Quetulan to snap at her and slashing its throat. The others tried to seize on the brief distraction, but she heaved the dead thing up and threw it at them, sending them scurrying back for a moment.

Claudia swung her glass sword back and forth and forth, trying to ward them off, but they were determined to encroach. The two girls were forced to retreat to prevent themselves from being surrounded- until their backs hit a wall of fig trees.



A beast jumped onto the tree from the side, and Claudia stabbed it in the spot where its hind leg met its body. But even as she gouged it out, the others closed in.

Before she knew what was happening, the full weight of an adult quetulan crashed down on top of her, slamming her to the ground. She lifted her sword flatly as a final defense, the only thing between her and the sharp claws and teeth.

“Get off of her!” shouted Venitia. She resorted to a frenzy of stabbing, hitting and kicking in a futile attempt to remove the beast from her companion. The Quetulans jumped at her, slashing at her throat with their sharp claws. And though she struck back quickly enough to prevent any lethal blows, more scratches and cuts appeared on her body.

It wasn’t long before they overwhelmed even her strength with wheathering blows, and she lost the power to save Claudia. She too collapsed from their weight as they piled on.

Claudia couldn’t see it, but she could feel the nips and slashes being made across her legs, and no matter how hard she kicked, they wouldn’t stop. She grimaced from the pain, and the exertion.

Cracks began to form in the blade of her glass gladius. Her eyes closed tight, unwilling to be witness to what was about to happen.

“Venitia!” a horrified, boyish voice cried out.

Claudia snapped open her eyes, and used the last of her strength to lift the sword, and turn her head to see the source of the voice.

It was Pristrix. He had followed them into the forest!

He urgently began to scratch something into the dirt with his stick. However, his shout of dismay did not go unnoticed by the the pack.





A Quetulan dashed towards him; he wasn't even able to raise his stick before it bit into his arm and sent him crashing to the ground. He yelped in pain.

But somehow, despite the animal gnawing at his arm, he finished the word with his free hand. As his finger traced the last letter, the ground around him changed, turning into glass.

The word only barely registered in Claudia's mind as her sword was pushed down, closer to her chest than before.

*Shatter.*

Her gladius snapped in half.

So did the forest.

White streaks whistled through the air. The quetulans howled. And then there was deathly silence

Blood and beast and glass. The battle of the forest was concluded.

Claudia breathed sharply, not moving at first. But eventually, she lifted the dead Quetulan off of herself, and brushed the broken glass off her face and clothes.

All the beasts were dead or dying with shards of glass protruding from their bodies. Where Pristrix had been standing a huge chunk of the forest floor was completely missing.

He slowly pried the animal's jaws from his now bloody arm, its lifeless body impaled with so much glass it looked like a large porcupine. He used his stick to support himself as he stood up, and limped to the fallen hunters.

Once he was by Venitia's side, he held out his hand. His expression was blank, the same as if he had made another the glass trinkets from the creek bank.

Venitia pushed the dead bodies off of herself and took his hand. With a pained groan, he helped her to her feet.

"The forest is dangerous," he said softly, once they were eye to eye.

"I could have taken them," she replied.



Pristrix looked down to her dagger on the ground, broken in half, and then back to her.

“Alright...”

“But thanks anyway.”

“You’re welcome,” he said.

They acknowledged each other for a moment in silence.

Venitia turned to Claudia, and helped her up. “I think the elders will have to help you know,” she said, “considering you helped eradicate an entire hoard of Quetulans.”

Claudia realized she was right. She had completed the task they had thrust upon her, granted with some assistance.

She would finally find out who her creator was.

Venitia grabbed one of the legs of the first slain Quetulan and began to drag it across the forest floor with her gauntlet hand. “Come on Claudia the Caerulean Paphonian, we have to get back to the village!”

Claudia might have imagined it, but for a second she could have sworn that Pristrix smiled. She blinked, and moved to follow Venitia.

“I can’t wait to show mother how stupid she was!” she exclaimed, with an eagerness that didn’t reflect her fear of near certain death moments ago.

Claudia raised her eyebrows, but decided not to say anything.

To take her mind off her stinging wounds, she let herself wonder about her creator as she took slow steps beside Pristrix. She speculated about their life, and their appearance.

She truly hoped that her abandonment was but a mistake. Oh, what a thought! Hoping that she was a mistake. Because the alternative meant she was not simply forgotten, but completely unwanted.



But even once she knew their name, there would still be the matter of finding them. After all, she was after the person who made her, and a name was not a person.

The walk back to the village seemed to take longer than the one to the grove. Near the end, Pristrix lent Venitia his stick and Claudia was left to carry the Quetulan. The fight had taken a bigger toll on her than she cared to admit.

When they crossed over the boundary of small rocks, she could see Hortensius speaking to Venitia's mother near the edge of town. Claudia watched as the matron angrily put her hands on her hips.

Venitia quickly pushed the stick back into Pristrix's hands, and took the task of dragging the Quetulan just so her mother would see once she noticed them.

"Do you know where Venitia is? She was supposed to help me with the sewing. Petelia seems to have lost track of Pristrix too, and he never goes into the forest alone!" she complained loudly.

Hortensius pointed at the three returning hunters. "You shouldn't worry yourself, Fabrina."

"I don't have time..." She stopped in mid sentence when she saw them. She stared for a moment, and then she shrieked.

"*Venitia!* Put that thing down! What do you think you're doing!? That thing will kill you!" she shouted, running to her daughter.

"Oh please mother. It's dead," said Venitia as a claw twitched.

"And you!" she pointed accusingly at Claudia. "How dare you drag my daughter into this, Paphonian!"

"I went on my own volition, mother," said Venitia, vexed.

"And you!" she turned to Pristrix. "You're always crowing on about how the forest is going to kill us all! Why didn't you stop them?!"



Pristrix didn't react to the accusation, and only stared at her with a glazed look.

Anger was a rarity in Claudia's short, short life, but Fabrina was beginning to stir some up inside her. She narrowed her eyes.

"If it hadn't been for them I'd be dead, and there would still be a dozen Quetulans roaming the forest, waiting to kill you."

"*A dozen!*" she exclaimed.

Claudia instantly regretted including that little detail.

"How could you possibly put the life of some dirty Paphonian before your own?!" she asked, shaking her daughter by her shoulders. Venitia just rolled her eyes.

"She did something amazing back there, something with incredible strength," Claudia interrupted her, "and so did Pristrix. You should be proud of them."

"Silence, Paphonian! You aren't getting a single thing from us! You will never find your creator, you evil thing, you—"

"Fabrina!" Hortensius said sternly. "They have indeed done a great service to the village. They should hardly be punished. I also believe I speak for all the elders when I say we will honor our agreements."

"May I speak to you in private?" asked Fabrina through gritted teeth.

"No," he replied. A thick, cold silence followed, unbroken in the air until she stormed off, leaving them with all her indignity gathered up.

"Venitia, go tend to your wounds. And Pristrix, I am sure this is an excellent chance to attempt the healing spells you have been learning. When you are done, go fetch the other council members."

Pristrix and Venitia nodded and went to do as he asked, albeit rather slowly. Hortensius turned to Claudia, and took a deep sigh.



"I apologize for your trials, and for our lack of hospitality, Paphonian," he said.

"...it's alright...I guess."

"You should come with me." He began to walk back towards the village and the place where the elders had first inspected her. As he led her in, Claudia began to feel the full depth of her injuries. She looked down and grimaced to see her bloody legs.

"Be still," he ordered. "We will hardly be able to work with you in this state." His cold, bony finger reached forward, and traced a word onto her forehead with slow, deliberate strokes. When his word was done he placed his palm overhead and closed his eyes.

Claudia felt nothing.

She blinked, realizing she quite literally felt nothing. No pain.

She looked down again in amazement as he retracted his hand. "Why weren't there lights, or anything magicky?"

Hortensius smiled wryly. "One usually gets tired of the theatrics with age. It is easy to make false realities seen, as that is what most beginning magicians do. What takes much more skill and practice is to make false realities real. What you ask us to do today is quite unique in that respect. We cannot change reality to meet your goal; instead we must retrace the path of the false reality that made you."

"It's a little discomfoting to think of my existence as a false reality," replied Claudia, shifting in place.

"I assure you, we all feel the same."

He left Claudia alone to help Pristrix assemble the other elders.

His absence allowed her more time to think and review.

The discomfort that came from thinking too hard about the nature of reality, the universe, and veracity of life was something



she quickly brushed to the side and saved for another day. Instead, she began to focus on the future: specifically, what she would do once she discovered the truth of her creator.

Obviously she would resume her job as a street magician. And she would continue to meet with her friends among the Anarchists, even if she so decided to leave them, or if she had to hide her creator's identity from them. But after she confronted her creator, what would she do?

Would she embrace them?

What would she ask them?

What if they were a bad person she would otherwise avoid?

What if they were the most amazing person she would ever meet?

What if they wanted to hurt her?

What if she wanted to hurt them?

The indecision and the unknowns made her anxious.

Claudia sat down as the elders entered and formed a circle around her. Hortensius and Fabrina were the last. The old man practically dragged the matron into the hut. But finally, they both sat on either side of Claudia.

Hortensius cleared his throat.

"The practice of discovering a Paphonian's creator by magical means was invented in the days of my father, and do not believe for a moment it was created out of kindness. The information was designed to be taken by force, as the assumption was the Paphonian had already decided not to reveal it. There are many more Paphonians that live among us than in Caeruleus, but even here your case is rare.

"We are going to begin a chant. It is in an ancient language, so do not expect me to teach it to you. You may hum with us if you want. I cannot promise the processes will be painless; neither can I promise we will succeed. Be warned once more, I am the



only one present who has ever attempted this. Are you absolutely certain you wish to do this?"

Claudia took a deep breath. "Yes. I am."

Hortensius nodded. "Good. Once we start, your head and chest will experience a burning sensation. Buried within yourself, somewhere, is a piece of the magician who created you. From that piece you grew. It will not be easy to find it, but no matter how much pain you feel you must remain relaxed. A common result of this ritual can be insanity for the Paphonian. If you resist, there is good chance that will be your fate."

"Wait, what?" asked Claudia, previously unaware of that fact.

But it was too late. They had already begun.

Everyone took the hand of the person sitting beside them, and started to speak in the ancient language. It was a language that was full of long words with rolling r's, hard c's, and mythic rhythms. Beneath their words were five musical notes repeated over and over, helping them keep time with each other. Claudia joined them in hum, accepting she could no longer go back.

The new pain came quickly, and without warning. It felt different from the Quetulan inflicted wounds, more like a match lit within her forehead and her chest, and growing into a burning inferno.

She gasped and her muscles tensed up. She couldn't keep humming. Her mind was in chaos, trying to force the pain down as she bit her lip. But the harder she tried, the less things made sense. The less she could remember what she was doing there, how she had gotten there, and what she wanted. Instead, a pressing question dominated her mind and body. She couldn't hear the question, nor did she truly understand it, and she most certainly couldn't answer it. But that only made it press harder.

She grasped for something, anything, that could return her grip over herself and her world.



Suddenly, she recalled the purpose of the question's painful inquisition. It needed to know who she was, and from that knowledge, it would reveal where she came from.

It needed to know her.

She forced her muscles to relax, knowing she would have to start at the beginning.

There was the old abandoned building. Then the Anarchists with all their blood red. Learning to fight. Making magic on the streets of the E/M district. Watching her friends fight to the death. Her doubt of her true identity. And then the truth, right from the mouth of an eccentric old philosopher.

That's when it happened. That odd scene she remembered when under Magister Tonas' spell returned to her. One moment she was sliding down the cold concrete wall. But then she was in the street. Except, it wasn't her. It was as if she was looking through another person's eyes.

"You idiot," she said in the memory, with a voice that wasn't hers.

The person she looked through felt very sad. Her new eyes looked to the ground. There was a puddle there, casting the reflection of a man in the grey of the night.

In the dirty water was the clear truth. There was her creator. And she recognized him.

It was Atticus.

Claudia's eyes snapped open and she gasped. "I know who it is!" she said with shock, scrambling to her feet.

The elders ceased their chant, allowing the greenish shimmer from magic in the room to fade.

Claudia was could feel a cold sweat gather on her forehead. She was still for a moment, all the old eyes on her.

And then she ran.

First she sprinted to Pristrix's home in a daze, snatching her bag as both Venitia and Pristrix watched wordlessly.





When she left with the same speed she entered, they both followed her.

She ran so fast. Faster than she had ever run before. She wasn't sure which way Silva Boreas was, the place where Atticus said he was headed, but she knew she had to run there.

Circling Claudia's head were dizzying repetitions: "How could it have been him? How could it have been Atticus...what am I going to do..." over and over in her mind.

The two Sylvanians she had befriended followed her to the rock boundary, but no further. As she fled into the wilderness, Pristrix heaved his staff down onto a word he had prepared. As soon as the staff touched the ground, a bright blue line flew out from the word and across the land. It surpassed Claudia in speed, and reached to the horizon.

"I know not who your creator is, or where you run to," he called after her. "But as a gift in exchange for fighting this day, I present this light to guide you wherever you have in mind. May you find what you are looking for!"

Venitia sighed as her hunting partner eventually ran from view. "Do you figure she'll be alright?"

Pritrix turned around, smiling to himself. "I don't know. But I feel that she will make her siblings proud."

"What?" asked Venitia, confused. Pritrix said nothing, only hobbling back towards the village.

She rolled her eyes, and started after him. But she paused, and glanced curiously to the word he had traced. It was a word that didn't seem to make sense to her.

*Sister.*



## Chapter Thirty Two

### Catching the Bus

Claudia stumbled into the town of Silva Boreas looking like she had been dragged face first all the way there. While Hortensuis may have healed her wounds, the blood remained on her clothes. Dirt and mud stains were smeared across her shins, and her hair, which had several leaves stuck in it, was in disarray beneath her crooked bandanna.

Even though Pristrix's magic had guided her true enough, she had tripped and fallen several times in her haste. Now, she was nearing exhaustion. It had been a very long day for her.

A few of the town's citizen, who were milling about and doing their business, noticed her. Some even began to make towards her, as if wondering if she needed help. But an approaching feminine figure in a frilly but torn dress caused them to pause, and silently return to what they were doing before. They watched curiously from afar.

Claudia went on, ignoring them, until she reached the town center, where she awkwardly and weakly made her way to the partially frozen fountain. She nearly collapsed at its edge. The day's sun had melted some of the water in its tiers, allowing her to scoop a gulp of fresh hydration with a cup made from her hands. She swallowed the water greedily.

She had run out of the water in her canteen over four hours ago; she had forgotten to refill it before leaving Frixfrox.

Once she quenched her thirst and splashed some of the cold water across her face, she regarded her distorted reflection in the ice and rippling water. It was all a mess.



Carefully, she ran her fingers through her hair, trying to restore some semblance of order. It was difficult for her to understand why, but she wanted to make herself look presentable.

She closed her eyes, and adjusted her bandanna. When she opened them, she discovered someone new standing beside her.

“Ah!” Instinctively, she jumped back and raised an arm in defense.

The sylvanian girl with braided blond hair only smiled and leaned towards her. Her nostrils flared, sniffing the air. “You smell funny,” she said.

Claudia kept her arm raised. “...yeah, I had a couple nasty tumbles in the woods. Something might have rubbed off.”

“That’s pretty silly; Caeruleans don’t belong in the forest.”

Claudia blinked, and slowly lowered her defense. “Who are you?” she asked.

“I’m Cynthia,” she replied. “This is my town.”

“Oh, okay...do you happen to know where a recent visitor named Atticus is? He should be around here somewhere. He came to visit family,” said Claudia, seizing upon the opportunity to try and find him.

Cynthia tilted her head, her smile growing eerily large at the mention of Atticus. “Well of course I know. I’m family. Cousin Atticus came into town just yesterday.”

Claudia looked over Cynthia again with that knowledge in hand. She didn’t look like Atticus at all. Not to mention she was a Sylvanian. But then, if there was any place she would encounter mixed families it would be here.

“So where is he?” asked Claudia expectantly.

“Now let’s not go rushing off already. You’re probably very tired, and hungry,” she turned to the sandwich stand parked at the edge of the square. “Hey Tiberius!” she shouted, “Could you whip up a couple sandwiches?”



“Anything for you, Cynthia!” he replied brightly. He picked up and tossed two wax-wrapped packages. Cynthia caught one with each hand, and offered one to Claudia.

She really wanted to press the subject and push away the food, but as she felt her stomach rumbled, she knew she didn’t have the willpower.

“Eat,” said Cynthia as the hungry traveler took the package, “then we can talk about Atticus.”

Claudia tore open the wax paper and took a ravenous bite. She had barely eaten anything all day; the warm bread and meat felt like bliss on her tongue.

Cynthia ate at a much more ladylike pace, even though she refused to chew with her mouth closed. They both sat down on the stone ledge of the fountain’s tall first tier.

After a while of silent consumption, Cynthia spoke up. “So...what is a little Paphonian like you doing looking for Atticus?”

Claudia nearly spit out the mouthful she was chewing. “How did you know—”

“The smell,” she replied simply.

Claudia wondered if all Sylvanians had such a keen sense of smell, or if it was only magic they could identify. She looked down, and frowned. “I only just found out. He’s...he’s...”

It was so difficult for her to say out loud what she had only earlier screamed within her mind at great volumes. It was almost like, if she were to say it, it would become true.

“Your maker?” asked Cynthia, finishing for her.

Claudia nodded.

“Well then,” said Cynthia, her smile returning triumphantly after she had been proven right. “How do you intend on taking revenge?”

Claudia turned to her with a confused look. “I-I’m sorry, what?”



“You know. Revenge. Violent bodily harm, infection of the plague, framing for a crime. The fun kind of stuff.”

“I just want to talk to him,” replied Claudia quickly.

Cynthia pouted. “You should be angry. At least, you have a right to be. To be a magician’s plaything. To be lied to.”

“But I don’t even know if he knows what he did,” she said, beginning to look at Cynthia with suspicion. “And why do you want me to take vengeance on him anyway? I thought he was your cousin.”

“Oh come on. Don’t you feel at least a little bit bitter? I understand your confusion and your distraughtness. I honestly do, because even though I might not be a Paphonian, I’ve been there. You didn’t know who you were, did you? You felt lost and not fully a part of the world around you. Can’t you see? That’s all his fault.”

There were echoes of truth in her words. All of them.

Claudia drew her arms around herself, as if to protect herself from the implications. But despite the extensions of sympathy from Cynthia, she began to wonder why she was dodging her real inquiries.

She looked to the Sylvanian with a new seriousness. “Where is he?”

Cynthia fell silent for a moment, glancing sullenly to her sandwich. “...he left this morning. His father became ill, and he went to go fetch the doctor from Tabernicus. He won’t be coming back.”

Claudia crumpled the wax paper in her tight fist with anger. She had missed him!

“But you might still be able to catch him in Tabernicus,” added Cynthia. “The bus leaves tonight.” From a hidden pocket in her dress she withdrew several Sesterces and nonchalantly held them out to Claudia. “Hope you change your mind about extracting a painful or debilitating revenge.”



She narrowed her eyes, and refused the money. She would barely have enough for the ticket back to Caeruleus, but she didn't want to take money from her.

“You're kind of a bitch, you know that?”

Cynthia shrugged apathetically.



## Chapter Thirty Three

### Work Ethics

The Senatorial Square in front of the sapphire senate building was a comforting sight to Atticus. He made his way through the plaza around the main entrance, admiring the city all about him. It was good to be back.

He had just gotten off the train from Tabernicus about an hour ago. He was lucky to catch the town's doctor just before he left his office. The physician had agreed to help, but only after he was paid twenty four Sesterces: the cost for three of Tabernicus' famous slop-buckets the doctor had been craving. It was surprising he wasn't the one having a heart attack.

Now that he was back in Caeruleus, Atticus hoped he would have less drama to deal with.

He paused for a bit at the fountain in the plaza's center, which boasted a grand marble statue. It was that of a woman in a white gown, with the inscription "VERITAS" below her feet. She symbolized truth, the mother of virtue; she held a gladius in one hand, and a torch in the other.

At the very base of the fountain was the artist's long and arcane name: Pygmalion.

He recalled the story of that artist who lived in Caeruleus a few millennium ago. The bitter yet hopelessly romantic man who fell in love with a statue. Not this statue, though. This was only his second most famous work.

He beheld it for a moment, seeing how every surface was smooth, and every inch of her pose graceful. He remembered, with more fondness, the first part of his trip, traveling with Claudia. He



wondered how she was doing, and he resolved to go by the E/M district sometime soon, to see if he could catch one of her performances. It would be nice to see her again.

Soon, he walked briskly up the steps of the Senate building: his new workplace, and his new home.

“Identification, please?” said the bored Praetorian Guard at the entrance. Atticus handed him his badge indicating his position. The guard’s posture straightened a little. “Go ahead, sir.”

As he strode through the halls, he assessed himself in preparation for confronting his predecessor.

He felt tired, but that came as no surprise. He’d just have to ignore that, like he always did. He ran a hand through his hair, and straightened his shirt, ensuring they were somewhat neat.

Before he knew it, he was standing in front of the doors to the Censor’s office.

He smiled, and felt a giddy shiver pass through him. Even if the senate expected him to screw up, even if they held him in the lowest regard, when he opened that door he knew he was finally and truly the Censor.

He turned the door handle, and pushed.

Inside the front part of the office were two desks, one on the right, the other on the left. Both were immaculately set, with every paper in its place. There was a small potted sapling in the corner, too. The ceiling was dim sapphire, and the walls were a mellow beige color.

The occupants of the two desks were both present.

A woman leaned back in her chair with her feet tossed up on the desktop as she read a book. Her skin was tan, and her hair was black. Another thing that Atticus couldn’t help but notice was how low cut her shirt was.

The other person in the office was the red haired doorman from the assessment. He stood on a ladder with a rag in hand, cleaning the ceiling.





Both he and the woman wore the blue shirts that designated the general staff of the Senate Building.

“Did something happen to the ceiling to get it dirty?” asked Atticus, curious.

The woman looked up from her book and the red haired man glanced back.

Instead of answering immediately, the man carefully stepped down from the ladder and presented himself before Atticus with his hands behind his back.

“No...It was simply time,” he said slowly and deliberately.

The woman laughed and slammed her book down on the desk. “Don’t mind Clemens. The cleaning fluids get to his head sometimes.”

Clemens frowned. The woman stood up and took her place next to him, her hands on her hips.

“You see, only an insane person would clean the ceiling and keep around that disgusting green and ceramic abomination you call a plant,” she motioned to the sapling in the corner.

Clemens glanced curtly to her. “Try to show some respect for the new Censor.”

“Of course. My apologies Censor...A-atlantis Permisc?”

“Atticus,” he corrected her. “And you two are?”

He cleared his throat. “I am Clemens Mantine, and this....‘humanoid life form’, is Flora Magona. We worked for Censor Senescere as his personal secretaries. We will both assist you when performing your duty to the Senate in the formation of laws; however, more specifically I am to assist you in the care of the Senate Building.”

“And I will help you with the National Archives,” Flora finished.

Atticus glanced to the book she had been reading. It had the seal of the National Archives on it, as well as a seal signifying a classified document.



“Are you supposed to be reading that?” he asked, pointing to the book.

“Very observant of you. Senescere always had to squint to see the seals.”

Atticus decided to leave the issue of the book alone.

“Anyway, where is Censor Senescere?”

“Former Censor Senescere,” Clemens corrected him. “He gave his letter of resignation to the senate two days ago. He’s already left for his house in the eastern countryside.”

“Did he say why?”

“Something about only living once,” replied Flora.

Atticus furrowed his brow: the old Censor was supposed to guide the new one for a few days before he took over. It appeared as though most of his guidance was going to come from these two. A thought that wasn’t particularly thrilling.

“Alright.” He sighed. “Is there anything currently occupying the attention of the office of Censor?”

“No need to sound so official, the last thing I need are two of him around here,” Flora motioned to Clemens. “But yes there are some things that you need to look at. It’s a little known fact that all changes to infrastructure and janitorial staff positions in the Senate Building and National Archives must be approved by the Censor. Which is why there are eight such positions awaiting your approval as well as renovations in the department of agriculture. On your desk you will find the detailed report on the renovations, and here are the files on all the prospective janitors.”

Flora picked up several thick folders off of her desk and presented them. Atticus kept his brow furrowed.

“In addition,” began Clemens, moving to his desk and selecting an even larger stack of papers, “there is a list of issues that the Tribunes and Departments wish you to pen into bills for presentation before the Senate. Including twenty-four issues brought up by the people’s department, three by the department



of revenue, two by the legionary department, two by the department of the navy, a combined total of six issues brought up by the Tribune of the Interior and his departments, nine by the Tribune of Justice and two by the Tribune of the Exterior. Each issue has a report which goes into the necessary depth. However if more information is needed, then both Flora and I can be used as resources to find more.”

“Oh, and I almost forget,” said Flora, tapping her chin, “Tribune Aurelius came down and asked for you to stop by his office at your earliest convenience. He also dropped off several boxes with what he said were your possessions.”

“Tribune Aurelius?”

She nodded.

Instantly, the heavy weight that was accumulating on his shoulder with every new piece of paper put before him was lifted, if only a little. He smiled.

“If you two could bring these folders into my office for me, that’d be great. I should be back in a little bit,” said Atticus, putting down his bag.

“Yes of course, Censor Permisc,” said Clemens.

Atticus went back into the hall the way he came in, and began his way to the people’s department.

The layout was still somewhat confusing to him, and the People’s Department was nearly on the other end of the building. He had to ask directions several times on the way there, but eventually he navigated his way to the correct department.

He told Quintus’ secretary about his summons, and sent her a friendly nod after she waved him through.

With a double knock on one of the double doors, he walked in.

There Quintus sat, behind his desk, looking all bureaucratically royal as he read over a report.



He glanced up when Atticus entered, and his eyes brightened.

"You called for me, Tribune Aurelius?" he said with mock formality.

"Atticus!" he exclaimed, standing up. "About time you got back. I was beginning to get lonely in this big blue box."

Atticus grinned. "I heard you brought in all my stuff from the dorm. Thought I'd say thank you."

"It's the least I could do," he replied. "Moving into the Senate Building must be a radically different experience compared to the academy. Have you started to feel the perks of being the Censor yet?"

"Well, I haven't seen the living quarters yet, but I'm sure it won't be too much of a change. It's still public housing."

Quintus chuckled. "At the very least, you can admit to the benefits of your secretaries. I met them during my assessment. A bit odd, but still a fine looking bunch. Especially the librarian one, with the...uh...large books. Although, I'm sure you could appreciate the red-haired fellow too."

Atticus felt himself turning red as he bent over laughing.

"They're, like, ten years older than me," he said, "And, while you're right about just how unusual they are, it looks like I'm going to really need their help in the next few weeks, more so than otherwise, since Censor Senescere has bowed out rather inconveniently."

"Ah, you'll be able to muck through it," said Quintus, crossing his arms. "But enough of work. Tell me how your little trip went. How were your parents doing?"

Atticus looked down and shrugged. "The same, I guess...kind, oblivious, passionate about their jobs."

"Were they proud?"

"Yeah...I guess. But that doesn't matter that much, they won't be coming to the city any time soon. My dad got pretty sick



while I was up there, and I don't think traveling would be that good for him."

Quintus nodded slowly, as if in understanding. "When my mom left, it felt as if the house became so empty and lonely all of a sudden. I don't know what I would have done without my dad there for me and Serena when we were that young, and I can't imagine what it was like for you. But that's all in the past now. I only hope that the Aurelius family has been there for you when you needed it."

He smiled. "You know, I don't know where I'd be if you hadn't decided to go on and try to be my friend back in grade school."

"You would be an understudy to Hectus and have a pet rock named Nero," replied Quintus promptly.

"I can see you've given this some thought."

"Oh, yes."

Quintus walked out to the front of the desk and idly tapped on of the stacks of paper. "There was another thing I wanted to talk to you about. It's about the Senate."

"I'm listening," replied Atticus, looking curious.

"It's the plan I wanted to discuss before you left. I've actually been working towards the first stage of it now."

He looked to Atticus, carefully measuring his reaction. "The Senate gave me several caveats about my power. Essentially, they told me to ignore the petitions, and clipped this office to a very small leash."

"Yeah, they said something similar to me. Although it was more to the effect of 'you're going to mess something up and then we get to blackmail you with it so don't even bother doing your job.' Pretty sure they'd fire me in a heartbeat if I step out of line."

"What if we did though?"

"Step out of line?"

"I mean, what if we tried to get fired?"



Atticus blinked, confused. “Why would we do that?”

“Because then there would be nothing holding us back.”

Quintus began to grin. “Think about it. There’s no way the Senate is actually going to let us get any good done the way they’d have it. But if we do present the most controversial but also most beneficial legislation for the people, then we’ll both have done something good and gotten ourselves out of this stupid arrangement.”

“What, exactly are you proposing?” asked Atticus.

“Article fifty-two. It’s already on your desk. The framework for the first comprehensive labor laws in sixty-three years. I even contacted a fellow who organizes strikes named Felix Catulli. He’s been working on procuring the people needed for a very explosive protest in the Senatorial Plaza.” Quintus paused as he noticed his friend’s trepidation. “You don’t have to do it if don’t want to, though. I know you worked really hard to get here, and I wouldn’t want to ruin that for you. Just say the word, and I’ll scrap it.”

Atticus looked down, and mulled it over carefully. Was he really willing to give up being the Censor? The only true power he had ever had? The position he had only just achieved? The very thing that he had to endure so much anxiety and dismay for?

He looked back to Quintus, and knew in half a heartbeat.

“I’m in,” he replied resolutely.



## Chapter Thirty Four

### The General

Listening to Claudia's story as she sat on a pile of rubble in the abandoned building, Virginia found herself seized with intermittent bouts of disbelief.

The wayward Anarchist had only returned yesterday, and she had invited Traj, Crassus, and Virginia to her home to tell them what she had found, and what she decided upon.

"They actually made you go on a quest to kill a bunch of wild animals for them?" asked Crassus, his brow wrinkled in contemplation.

She nodded, and hitched up her pant leg revealing several long white scars. "I had a little bit of help with that hunt, though. And fortunately, the village patron was able to heal most of my wounds. And in the end, I finally found out who made me!"

Traj opened his hands expectantly. "Who is it?"

"He's...well...I..." She sighed, and shook her head clear. "He's a magician named Atticus. And the reason I'm telling you all this is because I don't know if I'll be able to find him on my own."

"And is that also the reason you've decided to stay in the Burning Fases?" asked Traj with some cynicism.

"No," she replied adamantly. "I still believe I can help you all do some good. I just really need your help because...I can't turn to anyone else."

Virginia listened distantly; her mind was busy anxiously turning over the name she had heard. *Atticus...*

It had to have been a coincidence. How could Antony's sworn enemy, whom he'd promised deadly retribution for stealing



the Censorship, be Claudia's creator? She gulped, even as she tried to dismiss her fears about what Antony would make her do to her friend.

Traj snapped his fingers. "Say, were these Sylvanians able to show you what this Atticus looked like?"

"Yeah. He had a brown coat, kind of like mine, and darkish brown hair. And he looked very tired."

"I might just know who this fellow is!" he exclaimed.

"Really?!" asked Claudia eagerly.

"It'll take some doing to find him, but I should be able to get in touch!"

"Oh thank you, thank you!" she exclaimed, hugging him with gratitude.

"No thanks needed," he said, waiting for her to let go.

"After all, the sooner this is resolved, the sooner my secret weapon can concentrate on her work," he added once she released him.

"Excellent morale boosting, General Trajan," said Crassus, stepping forward with his hands behind his back. "If you all have this covered, I'd best be off. Felicia and I were set to inspect the factory we took from Servius, and then pick up some potatoes for dinner." He turned to Claudia with a small smile. "I'm glad you made it back in one piece."

"Yeah, if it's alright with you guys, I'd like to call it a night and get some rest," said Claudia, stifling a yawn. "I've been doing a bit more running and fighting for my life than I'd like lately, and I didn't get much sleep on the train ride down."

Traj nodded, and went with Crassus to the front room to talk about the factory they had annexed.

"Hey Claudia," Virginia began, getting up and moving closer to her comrade.

"Yeah?"

"Well, I was wondering...how do you feel about him? Your creator I mean."





She rubbed her arm nervously. "How I feel?"

"If you don't want to talk about it—"

"No, I do. It's just, no one's asked before. I feel...I feel...like he's a part of me. I don't know what part, but somewhere inside of myself there's a bit of him. And...I need to find out what that is. And then I'll have to decide..."

"Decide what?"

"Whether I destroy that part or embrace it."

Virginia wondered what part of Antony resided inside her.

"I just hope you make the choice that makes you happy," she said quietly, recalling the words she rehearsed. "And if you ever want to talk about it, I'll be here."

In a swift, unexpected movement, Claudia embraced her. "Thank you," she said.

Virginia was caught off guard, but tried to return the gesture after a moment.

"I'll see you around," said Claudia as she stepped back.

Virginia nodded, "Yeah, see you around." She left and joined Traj who was waiting in the front room. It looked like Crassus had already left.

"Do you really know a magician named Atticus?" she asked.

"Of course I do. It's not like I'd lie about something like that," he replied.

"I don't know. You are such a filthy, dirty, law-breaking liar, Trajan Catulli," she said with a saucy smile as she edged closer to him, until they were nose and nose.

He smirked in turn. "Is that so?"

"Yes...yes it is." She grasped his hands in hers, and leaned in.

They kissed passionately, and neither let up until they got bored.

"How about I walk you home tonight. I've got some time," he said with a grin.

"Nah, it's okay," said Virginia quickly.

“You sure.”

“Yeah.”

Traj let her go. “Alright. Hope to see you tomorrow. I could use some help planning the next battle.”

They went their separate ways.

Virginia was careful to stick to the shadows as she sulked along in the night. It wasn’t that she was afraid anything in the inky greyness could hurt her. Her fear was being seen going to the senatorial district. She could give no reason for Burning Fasces to distrust her, especially Traj.

She liked him. Very much.

A part of her loved running with the Anarchists. That freedom filled her with joy.

But there was another part of her. One which whispered cynical things. It reminded her that Traj and all his Anarchists were going to die soon, and that she shouldn’t be getting so attached.

She wanted to be free, she wanted to enjoy Traj’s company, but she knew that, in all likelihood, his death would be necessary.

Virginia shook her head in a vain attempt to clear herself such troubles. But it was long way to Antony’s mansion, especially since she had to take the lengthiest way through the E/M district to avoid detection, and the empty time allowed for many things to fester.

When she finally found herself in front of the doors to Antony’s office, she didn’t feel ready to enter them. Taking a deep breath, she forced herself.

Antony was seated at his desk, like he often was, reading a history: *The Fall of the Monarchy*. This night he wore a black jacket over a white shirt. He glanced up as he heard her approach.

“Ah, I was wondering when you would come in. It was getting later than usual. And I was feeling a bit more impatient than usual.”



“It is good to see you too, Antony,” replied Virginia, smiling for his sake. “I was just caught a bit late talking with one of the Anarchists: the Paphonian you requested I become close to.”

“Ah, how goes she?”

“She returned earlier today from her journey to Sylvania.”

“And was she able to discover the identity of her creator?”

Virginia hesitated. “She...was only able to learn his appearance. She has yet to learn his name.”

“Well I suppose that works to our advantage. The less claims on her loyalty, the easier it will be to use her for our purposes,” he mused.

She nodded. “If that is all, I think I will retire to my quarters.” She turned to leave.

“Wait,” Antony ordered. He stood up, and she froze mid-step. He stepped out from behind the desk, and went to her. With a hand on her shoulder he turned her back around, an inquisitive look on his face.

“Is something wrong?”

“No.”

“It’s just that I really enjoy our time together, would you stay for just a little longer?”

“O-okay...”

“Oh, stop it. You haven’t done anything wrong. Being nervous is so unbecoming of you.”

“Sorry,” she leaned into his body, and he wrapped an arm around her. “What have you been up to today?” she asked.

“Same old, same old. Mostly scheming, and some light reading. Tomorrow I’m meeting with Marcus and several of his lieutenants. How is your infiltration of the Burning Fasces going?”

“I doubt they suspect a thing. Tomorrow I will be assisting General Trajan in drawing up new battle plans. I sense that they’re itching to use the weapons they stole from the Praetorian Guard last time.”



“*General* Trajan? Is there a particular reason you endorse that unawarded rank?”

“Usually people just call him Traj. But he’s also the *de facto* leader of the Anarchists. It’s more a term of endearment than anything,” replied Virginia..

“You use terms of endearments?” asked Antony skeptically.

“Well, yes.”

“I’ve never heard you use them.”

“I think it might be awkward around you.”

Antony stared at her silently for a moment, his affectionate expression slowly becoming cold.

“Do me a favor,” he said, authority edging into his voice.

“Don’t do that anymore.”

Virginia blinked, confused. “What?”

“Don’t call him that.” He released her. “You can go to bed now if you want.”

She swallowed, and made for the door, eager to put this day to rest. She grasped the handle and pulled back, but when it was open, she did not go forth.

She gasped, eyes wide, fear seizing up her body.

“Funny finding you here, Virginia,” said Trajan, a scowl on his face.

“N-no...” she stammered. “You followed me here?!”

“You’re a fun girl, Virginia, but you shouldn’t have thought for a second I wouldn’t let you come this close without checking your background.” He looked to Antony. “Never know who might be out to get me.”

He pushed past her, raising the crowbar in his hand as an open threat. “Who are you, what is your relation to Virginia, and what do you want with the Burning Faces?” he asked, addressing Antony with a steely gaze.



Antony folded his arms, and regarded the newcomer with a passive interest. "Is this that fellow you were talking about earlier? Trajan Catulli?"

"So what if it is?" replied the Anarchist, even as Virginia was too busy panicking to respond.

"Then it seems we have some matters to discuss. Virginia, leave us."

"She stays," said Trajan firmly.

"No. She doesn't," replied Antony, he looked to her expectantly.

Virginia broke out of her terror for a second, and nodded dumbly at the command. She retreated to the hall, and closed the door. As they continued, she pressed her ear against the wood.

"You should know Mr. Catulli, that I have some grudging admiration for you," said Antony. "It takes a lot of skill and work to put together a group like yours. Not that it removes my utter disgust for you."

"Thanks. I guess. But you still haven't answered any of my questions," he replied. "Tell me. Who are you?"

"A better question would be: 'Who exactly, do *you* think you are?' Someone who calls himself a general, who thinks he has the power to just throw away our world order like yesterday's paper, who thinks that just because our current leaders are not fit to lead, no one is. You have delusions of grandeur too big for your stature," said Antony.

Trajan raised an eyebrow. "I'm not sure I'm the one who's acting too big for his britches here. Now either answer my Veritas-damned question or I bash your skull in."

"If you really must know, I suppose you could say I am... the order behind your chaos. You see, anarchy serves no real purpose on its own. It can't. I'm the provider of the ends to your means. The puppeteer pulling your strings."



“And what ends would those be, oh great puppet master?” asked Trajan with heavy sarcasm.

“Country, virtue, and truth, why of course.”

“Ha! Really!” the Anarchist snickered. “You give yourself up to such noble ideas, prostitute yourself to them! For what?! A chance to die for them? A chance to earn their undying gratitude? A chance to ascend to godhood? And I’m the slave here!?”

“You jest. But even you give yourself up to the idea of freedom.”

“Yeah! Freedom for me and my own! That freedom that makes us human! And I wouldn’t give it up for any virtue, country, god or heaven!”

Antony sighed. “Anways. I believe I forgot to mention one little addition to my little list of epithets. The killer of the great *General* Trajan Catulli!”

There was a click. A scuffle. Then two retorts of a gun.

Virginia covered her mouth as she sank to the floor against the door. Something broke in her heart. Perhaps a muscle, or a valve. Or maybe something else. Whatever it was, it left behind a dead space.

“No...please...no...”

She knew there was only one gun in that room. And it was the one Antony kept hidden under his jacket.

“I’m so sorry Traj.” A tear ran down her cheek, squeezed out from the tightness behind her eyes and within her chest.

“...I’m so sorry...”

The door opened, and Antony pulled her up by the arm.

“Come on,” he said through gritted teeth, dragging her back into the room. “Help me clean up this mess!”



## Chapter Thirty Five

### False Politik

**A**tticus hadn't taken a single nighttime walk since becoming the Censor.

It wasn't that he didn't want to. It was just that he had been working well into the morning hours every night trying to get every law transcribed to the specifications of all the departments and tribunes. He had been given fifteen days to do it all, and he hadn't had a moment to spare.

Now, the day he was set to appear before the senate, he was asleep in bed, sprawled out over the covers in his underwear. He had tossed and turned, some nightmare cruelly haunting him.

With a jolt, he woke, sitting up in an instant with a cold sweat on his brow and back. He stared at the open air blankly for a moment as he calmed himself down. As he was brought back into reality, he noticed the two people who had frozen in the middle of the room. Clemens and Flora.

He slowly reached for the thick Serca comforter he had thrown to the side, and used it to awkwardly cover himself. "...can I help you two?"

"Well, we were just about to rouse you, actually Censor Permisc. We didn't want you to sleep in too much since we must make preparations for the Senate," explained Flora.

"I...um... your assistance isn't really necessary right now."

"Censor Senescere never had a problem with it," Clemens interjected.

"You woke him out of bed in the morning?" Atticus asked flatly.



“Sure, all the time. He said he appreciated the exposure to human contact.”

“Oh...alright. Well, I suppose I should get dressed now,” said Atticus.

Clemens and Flora smiled, but didn’t move.

“You two can go now,” he added, moving his hand in a shooing motion.

A realization dawned upon them.

“We will go prepare your documents,” said Clemens as they retreated back into the office.

Atticus sighed once they had left, and slid himself out of bed, knowing it was time for him to get ready for what was sure to be an especially troublesome day.

The Censor’s quarters weren’t *opulently* grand. There was one room, a bathroom, and a closet. That closet also being the passage from the office to the living space. It’s only sapphire wall was the load-bearing one between the bathroom and the bedroom, but it’s furnishings were all antique and property of the state since days long forgotten.

The very first Censor after the fall of the monarchy was a man renowned for a high taste in art. At one point, he had decorated the room wall to wall with portraits and paintings, but now there was only one left.

A portrait of Caeruleus as a mere village before it was a city. In it, the houses were small, and the roads dirt. Atticus’ favorite detail was the man and two women who stood together in front of a house in the lower left hand corner, almost as small as pins, standing like they were posing for the artist.

Once he was dressed, and truly mentally awake, he entered the office.

Flora and Clemens were busy sorting through papers like they said they would be, and dashing back and forth between each other’s desk.





“Where did you put article 3,542?” asked Clemens.

“You mean where did *you* put it?” she replied, “And will you move?” she asked, flustered with Clemens standing in front of her desk. Clemens raised an eyebrow but didn’t move as he shuffled his papers.

Flora rolled her eyes and stepped around him, “Your attitude annoys me,” she told him.

Clemens glared down at her. “You hair annoys me.”

Flora immediately ran her hand through her sleek black hair indignantly.

“No need to be rude,” she said under her breath as she snatched the missing article from underneath one of her books.

“Hey, Censor Permisc,” began Clemens, “I was wondering, do you know why there’s a bunch of people protesting in front of the building?”

Atticus smiled, having gotten confirmation Mr. Cattulli had done his part. “They’re here about the labor bill, I’d imagine.”

“I just can’t believe the Senate is letting you put something like that on the docket,” said Flora.

“Oh no, me and Tribune Aurelius did that on our own.”

The two secretaries froze.

“Aren’t you afraid you’ll you lose your job?” asked Flora, in disbelief.

“Nah, I don’t care about that.”

“...could we lose our jobs?”

Atticus’ smile faded. He hadn’t thought of that. Perhaps he had been selfish with his lack of foresight.

Now that he considered it, he wasn’t sure if they would be implicated in the creation of the law. They had helped of course, but they were only secretaries.

“I’ll make sure it doesn’t come to that,” he promised.

“Thank you,” said Clemens. “I know it might be more important to try and help all those people in the factories,



but...it's just that the Senate Building is our home. We began living in the old servant's quarters when I became the head of the janitorial staff, and Flora the head of the Archive's staff."

"When was that, eight years ago?" Flora mused aloud.

Clemens nodded, "Yeah, that sounds just about right."

"What? Do they house all the civil servants here?" asked Atticus.

"No," replied Flora. "Our positions are only among a handful with the special privilege."

"I see," said Atticus absentmindedly as he picked up one of the bills: article 52. It was the revised version they had finished just yesterday. He was wondered how much the Senate was going to yell at him over this. It wasn't the long-term consequences that bothered him, though. He had never truly planned on being the Censor, and if he was forced to go back to his old plans of becoming a lawyer, he'd been fine with that, especially if he could still work with Quintus. In fact, now that he thought about it, being the Censor would have probably dramatically increased his reputation, a real boost to his career.

"Atticus!" exclaimed an eager voice from behind him. He looked back, and saw Quintus in the doorway, smiling.

"Everything is going according to plan," he said as he walked in.

"There must be several hundred protesters outside the main entrance. If I was a Senator, and I'm glad I'm not, I'd be feeling a little anxious."

"Excellent," replied Atticus as he took the other bills from Flora and Clemens.

Quintus patted him on the back, "I've got to go and make sure Tribune Ursacille doesn't go shut them down. You gonna make sure everything's in order for the Senate?"

Atticus nodded, "Yeah, I was just about to read over what I'd prepared to make sure I had it down. Make sure to give Ursacille a reckoning for me!"



“Will do!” he replied, “And good luck on the Senate Floor,” he called as he left.

After reading over the bills three more times, Atticus and Clemens left too, making their way to see the Senate. Flora had to go oversee the delivery of some ancient manuscripts to the National Archives and stayed behind.

Despite the good omen of the protests, Atticus was still nervous. He hid it as best he could once he entered the Senate Floor, which was immersed in its usual haze of blue light filtering through the crystal dome.

The Senators were just getting seated, but there was something tense about them. Praetor Julius Germanicus already sat at his desk, smoking a cigar and looking bored. Pliny and Tarquin soon joined him, sending Atticus a wary glance. There was a row of small wooden stations in the back, which hadn’t been occupied during Atticus’ assessment but were now filled with the journalists who reported on the Senate’s decisions. They were just starting to open their notebooks, and take out their pens.

It was the first time he had been on the Senate floor since his assessment; to him it felt like an eon ago.

He took a deep breath, and then proceeded to the podium in between the two sides of the Senate seats, putting his thick stack of papers on it. He scrunched his nose up as he smelled the burning tobacco from Julius’ cigar.

After watching Atticus take his place, the Praetor began trying to bring the Senate to order.

“Do we have a motion to convey the Senate into session?” he said through his cigar. The Senate didn’t react. The gentle roar of the Senators’ conversations drowned out his call.

Julius cleared his voice and tried again, louder. “Do we have a motion to convey the Senate into session?”

Once again he was ignored.



He rolled his eyes, put down his cigar and took two items out from under his desk: a pair of earmuffs, which he quickly slid on, and a wooden mallet.

Clemens groaned. "I advise you cover your ears, Censor Permisc."

"What? Why?" he asked, even as Clemens plugged a finger into each ear and the Consuls donned earmuffs with annoyance.

Julius raised the hammer with his flabby right arm, and brought it down against the desk as hard as he could manage.

The resulting sound was an explosion ripping through the chamber.

Atticus grimaced and covered his ears far too late.

The mallet had a charge of gunpowder in it, a measure to ensure everybody's attention. It worked: all the Senators fell silent and looked to the Praetor and the Censor. Their gazes were the only things stopping Atticus from letting out the string of profanities he had bottled up inside of him, ready to burst.

He glared at his red haired secretary. "You could have given a more detailed warning, you know."

Clemens shrugged. "You should cover your ears. The mallet can be very loud."

Julius took off his earmuffs and returned his cigar to his lips. "Do we have a motion to bring the Senate into Session?" he asked brightly.

He was given one, and a subsequent second.

There were no old orders of business, everything had been done to ensure the day could open with the Censor's remarks.

Finally Julius came to the main event. "Does the Censor have any new business?" he asked.

There was a moment of silence; Atticus glanced anxiously to the groups of Senators on either side of him. Somebody coughed. And then he spoke, for the first time, as the Censor to the Senate.



“I do. First, as a matter of housekeeping, in my power as caretaker of the Senate building I would like to issue a declaration that as of this moment no person shall smoke tobacco or any other substance while the Senate is in session.”

Julius broke into a coughing fit of disbelief.

“I-is there any motion for a vote of the nullification of this decree?” he asked hopefully.

There was none: the only person who smoked while the Senate was in session was him.

He let out a small whimper as Clemens plucked the cigar from his mouth and put it out in his ashtray.

“Also in new business I would like to propose that the introduction of forty-six new bills be added to the docket,” continued Atticus.

Julius grumbled a little. “Is there a motion to allow this addition to the new business docket?”

Pliny and Tarquin did the honors.

“You may proceed with the introduction of the bills, Censor Permisc.”

And so he introduced them, one by one. The labor bill was at the end, so he waded through his droning monologue, giving them each bill with its description and justification.

When Atticus reached the last bill he paused briefly and shuffled his papers.

“Bill 3,542 is unique compared the other’s I have presented. Originating from the People’s Department, it has received over fifty thousand signatures country-wide since its conception a little over two weeks ago.”

A bewildered look instantly came across the pair of betrayed Consuls.

“Our country’s industrial revolution has brought in billions of Sesterces and thousands of jobs for our economy. But with the



growth of industry, has also come the growth of abuse to the Plebian Class.

“With unemployment of those living in the Plebian District at fifteen percent, the employer has become king, and barely livable wages, and sometimes non-livable wages, have become the norm. Any leave of absence, no matter illness, injury, childbirth or tragedy, is taken as foundation for firing. Death and injury which are caused by the negligence of factory managers and owners are never punished. In fact there was a case just earlier this month, where a little girl was killed when she fell onto a textile machine in a factory and bled to death.

“To combat these problems that are nothing short of a blight upon the humanity of Caeruleus, this bill was made. In it, there are measures to hold factory owners and managers accountable for any harm their negligence causes, to establish a minimum wage for industrial workers at 4 Sesterces an hour, to remove the political party designation on labor unions so to decriminalize them under the Caesar-Severus act.

“The Censor would look favorably upon a motion to move bill 3,542 to the front of the Senate’s docket, and open it for debate,” Atticus finished.

Julius raised his eyebrows. “Do we have a motion to open the bill to debate on the Senate floor?”

Slowly, a thin smile of opportunity began to grow across Pliny’s lips.

“Now wait a second! We agreed we’d throw out all the bills he put out,” said Tarquin preemptively.

“I think we do have a motion, Julius,” said Pliny smugly.

The Praetor let out a sigh, as if he knew what was about to happen. “The Senate may now open debate.”

The echo was up in the air for a split-second, and then the shouting began. It started with a few, stronger, voices, addressing their colleagues. But it grew until there was complete uproar in the



Sapphire Senate Room. None of the exclamations were directed at Atticus. Even Tarquin was too busy pointing and shouting at his counterpart.

Julius put his earmuffs back on.

“Well done kid. Well done. I haven’t seen them this worked up in a while.”

He tried, in a pitiful attempt of stealth, to relight his cigar. But Clemens snatched it away once more.

“You know, I’d figured they’d be more angry at me for bringing this bill up,” said Atticus, watching them debate curiously.

Julius moved one side of the earmuffs off his left ear, and gave him an incredulous look. “You’re kidding me right...”

He shook his head.

“Well, I’m not going to say they still won’t buck you out, but labor laws are something that’s more controversial than anything else between those guys, an issue that splits them right down between the two factions. The industrialists would never agree to anything that would hurt their businesses, and the aristocrats, whose wealth is tied in the land they own, are sick of the industrialists agenda dominating the docket, and feel like it’s their duty as the pillars of our great Caerulean civilization to make us all as dignified as possible. Not to mention the more money the workers bring home the more money the aristocrats can get out of them as rent. They’ll both be too busy bashing their heads against each other for a while to care about you.”

“Ohh...” was all Atticus had to say of the political dynamics which surrounded him.

According the rules of the Senate he could not leave the podium until either the Senate dismissed him, or the session ended. When it came to a rambunctious debate such as this, the latter seemed more likely.



Atticus stood as patiently as he could, but there were few things the Senate did better and longer than arguing.

Eventually though, the Senator's stomachs demanded a recess for lunch.

He snatched his papers off the podium and began to turn around when he was finally allowed to leave.

"Censor Permisc!" called a deep voice behind him.

Atticus looked back and saw one of the reporters from the Senate Press Corp approaching him. After a moment, he realized he had seen that man before.

"*Crap!*" he thought to himself, standing frozen in shock. "*It's that guy who took that photo of me in the Plebian District. If the Senators find out I'm doing anything weird like that, they might...*" he caught himself just before he thought the word 'fired.' "*Oh. Yeah...*"

"Go head back to the office," he told Clemens as he walked towards the reporter, "I'll be there in a bit."

The reporter smiled and held out his hand, "A pleasure to finally be introduced to you, Censor Permisc."

"Likewise, Mr...?"

"Euxin, Tros Euxin. I just wanted to give you this," he said, taking out a folded newspaper from one of his coat pockets and giving it to him.

Atticus opened it to the front page, and saw a picture of himself, facing away from the camera; whimsical, colorful lights floating around him. The headline read: **Unnamed "Nocturn Magician" performs in the Plebian District.**

"Thank you for printing this picture," said Atticus graciously, "You know, as opposed to the other one."

"Yes, it turned out to be the better choice anyway. But to think I had stumbled on the secret of our new Censor that night, well, isn't that just crazy," said Tros.

Atticus blinked. "Wait, is this...blackmail?"





“No, no, no, of course not. Your secret is safe with me. I just find it odd, that’s all. I usually like to do news stories with a human interest slant, but I recently got transferred to work on the Senate. An interesting coincidence that one of my first big stories here will be your new labor laws. Speaking of which, is there a statement you would like to make for the people of Caeruleus?”

“Well, sure. This law will give much needed protections to the workers of Caeruleus, many of whom work in dangerous conditions for little pay. We need to ensure that they won’t be bullied by their employers and the industrialists, and that the Praetorian Guard protect their rights. It is the very least we can do to right the injustices in our factories.”

Tros jotted the bit down in his notebook.

“I’ll guess I’ll be seeing you around, Mr. Euxin. But right now I think I should check in with Tribune Aurelius.”

“Alright,” he said, “Thank you for your time, Censor Permisc.”

Atticus nodded, and left the Senate Floor with his papers, both old and news, under his arm. He swiftly made his way towards the main entrance. When he got there, he found the place swarming with Praetorian Guards in riot gear.

He squeezed his way through them, muttering a polite “excuse me,” and “pardon me” every few seconds.

Eventually he made his way to a clearing in the guards that was near the front line between them and the protesters. There he found Marcus and Quintus.

“....and I am telling you, Tribune Ursacille, that this is a peaceful protest. There is no need for the Praetorian Guard to take any further action,” Quintus said with frustration, his arms crossed.

Atticus joined him by his side. “Is there a problem here?”

“Well now that you’re here, there are three,” replied Tribune Ursacille flatly.



“He wants to clear the protesters out of the square,” explained Quintus. “Which is idiotic on several accounts.”

“This isn’t your choice, Tribune Aurelius. I want this place cleared, so it will be cleared,” said Marcus.

Quintus narrowed his eyes. “Then I’m sure you won’t mind me going to Praetor Germanicus and asking him to open an investigation into the Praetorian Guard’s handling of it, as well as the handling of some other affairs.”

“Germanicus would do no such thing!”

“Oh, like he’d care enough to stop it!”

“It...it’s just not acceptable!” Marcus exclaimed, approaching a hair-tearing rage. “This is an outrage! A complete and utter riff-raff! A total disruption of the peace!”

Quintus looked over the crowd with a cheeky smile. “I know, isn’t it great?”



## Chapter Thirty Six

### The War on Hope

Antony had been very keen on receiving his newspaper daily. Besides his meetings with Virginia, it was what he looked forward to most. It wasn't that he liked the articles, or that he was pleased by the "news" they declared. It was simply another way of finding out where all the pieces lay in his little game.

Today, he craned over the front page, glaring at the main headline. For a reason he couldn't discern, the silhouette of the man in the picture looked vaguely familiar.

"The *Nocturne Magician*, huh..." he said to himself, as he read through the article.

How wasteful for a person to give up his talents to such lowly people. For free, no less.

But more than wasteful, this unnamed magician represented a problem to his plan, and that made Antony's hatred for him advance to the extreme.

It wasn't so much that he was himself an obstacle, more so he was a metaphor for the obstacle. Inspiration for hope within the masses, that was something quite unnecessary. His plan called for anger, not hope.

He shook his head. "This simply will not do."

The door burst open, and in stormed Marcus Ursacille, his hat a little rumpled.

"How are things going in the Senate Building?" asked Antony, leaning back in his chair.



“Irritably,” said Marcus, pacing back and forth in the room with a bitter purpose. “Permisc and Aurelius have been conspiring to rouse the masses and pass a round of labor laws. If they go unhindered, they’ll definitely cut into my profits from the canning factories.”

“What was that you can?” asked Antony.

“Ham,” he replied. “But the point is, we should discuss ways of stopping them.”

“Hm,” began Antony mulling it over. “If there is enough sway in the Senate, then they will be stopped. But it doesn’t matter in the slightest if their silly law gets passed, either way. After our revolution, such tiny things will be in the past, your business will boom, and, I promise, Caeruleus will be yours to bring into a glorious new age. Perhaps their attempts to move public support against the Senate will even work in our favor.”

Marcus stroked his beard. “...I suppose you’re right. We should be focusing our efforts on the plan.”

Antony nodded. “And in line with that thought, I wanted to talk to you about this.” He held up the newspaper.

Marcus moved closer and put on his monocle.

“Oh yes, I read that one earlier. Some daft fool showing off in the Plebian District. What about it?”

“One, I don’t like him. Two, the sentiments he’s spreading are detrimental to the ones we need to execute the plan. I was hoping you could arrange the Praetorian Guard to eliminate him.”

Marcus blinked, putting his monocle back in his pocket. “That feels a tad brash to me. Are you sure that’s absolutely necessary? It’s just one man. One news story.”

“Yes, I’m sure. You’d be surprised what just one story can accomplish.”

Still, Marcus hesitated. “I don’t know...”

With a sigh, Antony stood up, and went around his desk. “I understand it’s a difficult favor to ask. All of this is difficult, on



you especially. And you'll also reap the greatest rewards. There will come a day, if I so live to see it, when I will call you *Emperor* of Caeruleus. But before that, know that I shall first and foremost, regard you as my friend."

The Tribune smiled. "Thank you, Antony. And I'm sure I can put a notice out for this odd character. It just hasn't been easy, especially with having to keep the lid on that massacre in the Industrial District. I assure you, we are in this endeavor together."

He nodded in agreement. "In it to the very end."



## Chapter Thirty Seven

### A Grand Compromise

In a candle lit restaurant in the highest end of the Senatorial District sat two grumpy men in a corner booth.

Consul Pliny and Consul Tarquin already knew what they wanted to order, at least for each other. A three course meal starting with a bowl of sanguineous soup, a glass of condescending coffee, an entrée of mendacious mince, and ending with a sweet, flakey-crusted slice of humble pie.

Pliny chewed slowly on a breadstick.

Tarquin drummed his fingers on the side of the table. He was the first one to speak up. "So...uh...those two kids from the academy..."

"They're out," said Pliny quickly, through his mouthful of garlic-soaked bread.

Tarquin nodded, breathing an internal sigh of relief.

"Under one condition," Pliny continued, holding up his index finger.

"What?" he asked flatly.

"Admit choosing them was a stupid idea and you're leading to the moral decline of society."

"You see, this is why you don't have any friends."

"Really?"

"Yes. You just belittle everyone around you."

"Alright. I'll drop the last part."

Tarquin rolled his eyes. "Fine. I was wrong, the two were harder to manipulate than I thought. They're going to be a headache in the future."



Pliny nodded. "I told you so."

"Now, shall we get down to the serious business?" he asked.

"Yes we shall. And I should start by informing you that the labor laws are going to be passed."

Tarquin frowned. "Oh come on Pliny, the industrialists are going rally around me, and they are going to rally against it. You need a majority of 51 out of 100. We've got 50."

"Not so fast, my dear esteemed colleague. I've already spoken to Senator Septimus, the one who runs the baking syndicate, he's agreed to lend his vote to our cause."

"Dammit Septimus," he muttered.

"So the only thing in question here is: in what state the law gets passed?" continued Pliny.

"What do you want?"

"I'll scrap the provisions on negligence and reclassification of labor unions, in exchange, let us includes a tax hike on the sale of heavy machinery and refined oil, another million Sesterces for the wheat subsidiaries, as well as some money for more irrigation projects. Oh, and a 20,000 Sesterce fund for the Caerulean Botanist Society."

A waiter came by, and they both stayed silent as he served them their Caesar salads.

When he had gone, and Pliny stabbed his fork into the leafy greens several times, Tarquin scowled. "Stupid filthy botanists."

Pliny paused, just as he was bringing the fork up to his mouth. Slowly, he put it down, and adjusted his glasses. "I'm a botanist."

"What?! No you're not."

"Yes I am. I have a degree, and a greenhouse and everything. I published a paper last year on the way nitrogen fertilizers affect different genuses of flowers."



Tarquin raised his eyebrows, and stirred through his salad, searching for a crouton. “I’ll do it. But you know, I really hate your guts, Pliny.”

“The feeling is mutual,” the other Consul replied sincerely.

They ate the rest of the meal without sparing another word. Thus was the work of politicians.





## Chapter Thirty Eight

### Nocturne Magicians

Claudia had just finished her performance in the E/M District streets earlier in the afternoon, and she was walking home with a heavy bag of change. The other street performers didn't like her because she had begun to cut into their margins; many wouldn't even talk to her. Yet they would never do anything to force her to leave because they recognized the meaning of her red bandanna, and they had seen her with Traj and Crassus.

Despite all this, Claudia always looked forward to her time there. It took her mind off things, and allowed her to scan the large crowd for any sign of Atticus.

For the past few weeks, the thing she had wanted to take her mind off was Traj. Or rather, the lack of Traj. She hadn't seen him since the day she returned from Silva Boreas; when he had promised to find a way to contact her creator...

All the Anarchists were growing anxious. They looked over their shoulders more often, held their weapons closer, and were much more suspicious of outsiders. It was their fear that he had been kidnapped or killed, since he had never disappeared without warning for so long before.

There had been no word from the few spies they had in the lower levels of the Praetorian Guard, no word from anybody on the streets, no word from anywhere.

Crassus was taking care of the day-to-day operations now. And even though he had a façade of hope, Claudia could see the cracks in it that exposed the worry underneath.



Yesterday, he announced a reward of 600 Sesterces for information on Traj's whereabouts. Nothing had come back yet. She wanted to search for him on her own, but she didn't know the first place to start. Neither, it seemed, did anybody else.

She didn't want to feel so tormented over something she couldn't do anything about.

With a sigh, Claudia decided one more performance of a magical nature was in order for the night, this one just for her, as a distraction.

It was getting dark, and the street she walked down was small and empty. The only person there was one Praetorian Guard patrolling on the other side of the road, so she waited until he had turned the corner before she cracked her knuckles, and chose her story.

"When the final war of the monarchy began to be waged, the King declared conscription for all the men and boys. To Sumrona Arx they were set to sail and march, to expand our Caerulean empire. Although, for all the grievances the King alleged against the foreign nation, there was not much anger and fury towards the enemy."

Claudia closed her eyes, and imagined the old Caeruleus City. She raised her hand, and traced the tips of fingers along the rough concrete wall of the tenant building beside her, pretending it was the portal to that distant place of kings and war.

"Young Domitus, a quiet scholar, was fearful when he heard the news. He didn't want to fight the king's fight as the king's man. But the king was his patron, and he knew the conscriptors would come for him, just like everyone else. So one night, in the thick of darkness, he fled. Running from war, death, and the civilized world."

Claudia looked over the wall she traced her fingers against. Like a glass panel for an unearthly viewing platform, it revealed



the scene of the running scholar dressed in a freedman's tunic and hat, and carrying a bag stuffed with money, food, and scrolls.

"He flew through the countryside. Uncertainty and fear much heavier in his heart than before. He had no idea what his fate would be. He could not go back, only advancing, aimlessly, without a plan."

As she watched the scholar flee, she felt his struggle. For though she walked at an even pace, she was trapped in the same predicament he was. Not knowing if her path would lead her forward, backwards, or in circles.

"After barely surviving on the scraps of the villages he passed, he stumbled into a new, strange place. It was a temple of the cult of V, in the center of a most secluded town, where war and fear was still far off. Upon seeing the dirty, exhausted, withered man collapsed on their doorstep, the followers of the gods took him in."

Claudia grasped the edge of the wall, and found that it was soft and malleable, so she thrust it aside, as if it was a tapestry hung on a castle wall. And then she was with them, the street transformed into the torch-lit hallway of the cult of V's temple, watching as they took Domitus to a bed and a healer.

"Virtus herself, who the cult did worship, went to meet him as he regained his health. She told him he had a place in their town if he so chose it. She could guess by the contents of his bag who he was, and why he was there, and so she offered him work in the temple's library and the position of bard for the town's people, since they were lacking in both capacities. Though he knew little about the Cult of V, he agreed. It was the best opportunity he had ever gotten since he had started running, and the best he would ever hope to get."

Claudia smiled and bowed lightly in respect as the immortal goddess presented herself in her illusion. Virtus wore a white gown, her brown hair was weaved into an elaborate braid,



and her lighter brown skin shone in the flickering light of the room's imagined fireplace.

"So Domitus found himself a new patronage, or rather matronage, and a new home. And he found it good. He told stories to the children of the town from the histories and legends he had studied in Caeruleus city, and also from the new ones he had begun to study there, about the old gods and goddesses."

The scene changed, and now Claudia pretended to be the audience, listening to his poems with a group of eager children sitting on the floor.

He smiled, finding joy in his work in the same way as Claudia.

"But his happy life among them was not left undisturbed for long. One day, when the sky was cloudy, and the air was cold, the King came to the town. He wanted to speak to Virtus, to convince her to support his war efforts. Though he knew the king would not recognize him, Domitus kept hidden during his stay."

In swept the King and his guards, with all their uniforms and weapons, looking ominous and dark in Claudia's vision.

"Virtus, of course, rejected his demands. Such an unjust war was against her nature, as was being an agent of the state. She had learned a long time ago not to deal with those affairs. But the King refused to accept her answer, he had become frustrated with the lack of support in his people. He resolved to burn the town and the temple down, with her inside."

The guards went into action, seizing torches and lighting fires that would engulf all the homes of the long destroyed town.

"As he heard the commotion, Domitus burst from his hiding place in the temple. He saw the destruction, and fell to his knees in despair. His life had been destroyed once again. And once again, he felt there was nothing he could do. He wept openly in the streets, having given up."



The made-up world around Claudia burned, and she watched it all with a solemn expression. But she knew it wasn't the end of the story.

"Nearly all the guards left the scene, having done their work. The homes were burned. The temple was desecrated. The tomes Domitus has cared for in the library were destroyed. The followers of V and the townspeople consoled their friends and family around the ashes. And as for Virtus herself, she went to Domitus and pushed him back to his feet. 'It's alright, it's alright,' she told him. He shook his head, and told her how he was too tired. How he didn't want to care about his life anymore.

"There is more at work here than your life. Come with me if you wish to change this wretched world. Have hope,' she said. 'Have hope this can change.'"

"Have hope!" Claudia shouted, more to herself than for the people of her story.

And she did. Because she knew what happened beyond the end of this recitation.

Virtus and Domitus rallied the Cult of V, the People of Caeruleus, and the Senate, leading revolution against the monarchy. And if they could do so, she could have hope that Traj would be found, that the Anarchists would succeed in their mission, she could find her creator, and, most importantly, something would change for the better.

Claudia breathed heavily, standing in the middle of the street now as her magic faded.

"Have hope," she repeated to herself one more time, trying to find security in the two words.

But she didn't have that security for long.

Something hard collided with her head. She yelped and fell to the ground. There was no time to react as she felt another blow on her back and then cold metal handcuffs locking on her wrists.



Her vision became a dizzy and blinking mess, and her consciousness was ebbing away from her.

She was surrounded by the purple of Praetorian Guard uniforms, and was lifted roughly into the back of their police vehicle. There was a flash of light somewhere in front of her, and one of the guards shouted.

The last thing she heard before she passed out was: “Are you sure we should be taking her to this Purpura fellow?” asked one of the guards.

“Shut up and do as you’re told,” said another.

And then it all faded to black in the back of the moving Praetorian Guard car.



## Chapter Thirty Nine

### An Incriminating Photograph

Tros Euxin had never considered himself to be a patient man. So, as he sat there at his desk in the back of the Senate Floor waiting for one particular individual, he found himself growing increasingly eager to tell them what he had discovered.

He tapped his toe and thumbed through the photographs he had taken and developed last night.

He was entranced with the picture and pondered over its meaning. He didn't even realize when his fellow senatorial press corps members had arrived and taken their seats around him.

"Morning, Tros," said the fellow behind him.

He blinked and turned around. "Good morning to you too...Cerberus." He was still working on memorizing all their names.

"So tell me, after the first couple days, what do you think about the job?" Cerberus asked, resting his folded arms on the thin wooden barrier between their workplaces.

"Well I can't say it's more exciting than what I used to cover. But it certainly pays better," Tros replied, flipping over the photographs nonchalantly so they were face down. "There's something about going out on the streets, talking to people, and finding out what's really going on that I'll always prefer. In fact, I've been having trouble letting go of some of my old reporting habits."

One of the guys on his other side chuckled. "It's funny, the whole reason I took this job was so I wouldn't have to deal with



that. Almost worth it to have to report the bullshit that comes out of those politician's mouths," he said, motioning to the Senators. They all laughed.

"Well, I suppose that we all get into the business for different reasons," said Cerberus. "How about you Tros, why'd you get into reporting?"

He smiled as he stood up, seeing his mark. "For the hope I could change something," he replied, as he picked up his photographs and went onto the Senate Floor. "Be back in a sec," he told them.

He walked up to Censor Permisc and Tribune Aurelius, grasping those photos tightly.

"Good morning, Gentlemen," he said.

"I certainly hope it is, Mr. Euxin," said Atticus, looking grim as he rubbed the sleep out of his eyes.

Quintus blinked, glancing in between his friend and the new man, "...care to introduce us, Atticus?"

"Oh yeah. Mr. Euxin, this is Tribune Quintus Aurelius. Quintus, this is Mr. Euxin a reporter with the Avian Hill Journal."

Tros tipped his hat. "An honor, Tribune Aurelius."

"Likewise," said Quintus. "Was there something you wanted to share with us?" he asked, eyeing the photographs Tros held.

"Yes. I wanted you to take a look at these. I took them last night and they'll be printed in the afternoon edition. I figured Censor Permisc would find them interesting so I thought I would give him a heads up," he explained, handing over a copy of the picture to each of them. "As I'm sure you can see, it shows the Praetorian Guards dragging some poor soul into the back of one of their cars."

"What is all this white stuff around them, is that some kind of afterimage?" asked Quintus, holding it up to the light.

Tros shook his head. "No, that would be what was left of the magician's illusion. The one who's being carted off. It's





difficult to tell who they are, or even their gender from where I was standing. But I watched as they did some magic in the street, and then as a group of Praetorians hit them with their nightsticks and handcuffed them. One of them even chased after me when they saw the flash, but I was able to get away.

"I checked earlier today, no arrest was logged for such a person. All in all, I find it highly suspect. Especially considering my story about the Nocturne Magician only ran two days ago."

"And you think these Praetorians have arrested, or rather kidnapped, the Nocturne Magician?" asked Quintus, sounding intrigued by the whole situation.

"No, I don't think so. The one they kidnapped didn't have the profile of the man from my original article." Tros glanced to Atticus. "It's possible they thought it was the Nocturne Magician, though."

"What do you think we should do about this?" Atticus asked, looking to Quintus.

He paused, and thought about it for a moment. "Mr. Euxin, where would you say the corruption and abuse of power in the Praetorian Guard lies in the scheme of great issues in our time?"

"Considering that I've been threatened, imprisoned without charges, and had several guns pointed at me for having the audacity to write about the Praetorian Guard shutting down a workers' strike, I'd say pretty high."

"Wait, really?" asked Atticus in shock. "That's horrendous!"

"And you would have known about those practices if you had read the paper," said Quintus flatly.

"I don't expect you two to independently try to reform the Department of Justice, but if you could look into this matter, it would mean a great deal to me."

"Hypothetically speaking, what do you think would happen if we tried to push the reform of the Praetorian Guard?" asked



Quintus, tapping his chin. “I’m sure there’s a great deal of public support for it.”

“Of course, but too many people in the Senate rely on the current state of the guard to keep their businesses running smoothly and keep their profits high. They’d probably eject you from your positions,” said Tros, crossing his arms.

Atticus and Quintus exchanged a look.

“Consider this matter inquired upon,” said Quintus.

“Plus a little more,” added Atticus.

“The Tribune of the Plebs has the authority to open audits of the other departments with the permission of the Praetor. I’ll go speak to Julius, and if he agrees, which I don’t think he cares enough not to, I’ll start sending some telegrams.” Quintus began to walk towards the Praetors’ seat to get in a word before the Consuls arrived.

“So you think that the Praetorian Guard targeted this person because they thought they were the Nocturne Magician?” asked Atticus once Quintus was out of earshot.

“I think it’s quite likely. Or it could be that they were after you,” said Tros.

“I don’t even know if I’m the real Nocturne Magician that everyone’s been talking about. But...I suppose I have a responsibility to try and help whoever this is. Chances are, if it weren’t for me in your article, then they wouldn’t have been kidnapped.”

Tros nodded, pocketing his copy of the picture. “Let’s just hope that poor soul is in a big enough piece for your help to matter.”



## Chapter Forty

### Captivity

When Claudia came to she found herself tied to a chair, blindfolded, gagged, and suffering from a massive headache.

With a groan, she rolled her head back and forth, trying to figure out what had happened. It wasn't long before the events of her capture replayed in her mind.

She mentally cursed herself. What was she doing attracting attention to herself in a time like this?! Now the Praetorian Guards had gotten her, just like they had probably gotten Traj.

She squirmed in place, trying to loosen the bonds around her wrists. It was only a moment before she felt a fist connecting with her stomach.

She felt all the wind forced out of her with a grunt into her gag.

The blindfold and gag were ripped off her head. She blinked repeatedly. Although the light was dim, it was still blinding.

"Well, well, well. You're certainly not how imagined you. Either from the newspaper's or Virginia's descriptions," said the man who punched her. "I always pictured the great secret weapon of the Burning Fasces and the legendary Nocturne Magician as someone with a bit more robustness to them."

As her vision came into proper focus, she saw a short, expensively dressed man with hair tinged blue but fading to grey. He smiled a predatory smile.

"Who are you?" she asked weakly.



"I'm Antony," he replied cheerily. "And you should be very thankful that you are alive at the moment. If Virginia hadn't interfered on your behalf, I would have had those guards dispose of you."

"V-Virginia? She's here?"

Antony nodded to the corner of the room behind him. And there she stood: the double agent who had infiltrated the Burning Fasces.

"I told him you could be helpful. Please don't try to struggle, Claudia, as long as you cooperate no one will hurt you." She glanced to Antony before adding, "Anymore, that is."

"I don't understand. Why would the Praetorian Guard bring me here? Do you work for them?" she asked, betrayal edging into her voice.

Antony scoffed. "You've got it all backwards. The Praetorian Guard work for us."

Claudia eyed him with suspicion. She had learned from the Anarchists a long time ago to never trust anyone who had anything to do with the Praetorians.

"Just hear us out," pleaded Virginia, stepping forward, and kneeling down until she was eye level with her. "I know that you don't feel completely right with the Burning Fasces. I know you don't think you belong there. And you don't."

Claudia looked away and closed her eyes tightly.

"They're not good people!" said Virginia. "Think about what they did to all those guards at the factory. Think about all the people they killed and all the chaos they've caused! Surely you can't see any virtue in that?"

"They are family!" Claudia shouted. "I don't care about the damn morality of it, and I certainly don't embrace it. But they're my family! And I thought they were yours too!"

Virginia narrowed her eyes. "You think they care about you like that?! You think you're family to them? To them you're just a



weapon! A freak they can use to their advantage! And weapons like us, we don't have family."

"Regardless," began Antony, "The Burning Fasces will be destroyed. In fact, it's only with my patience that they've continued to exist at all. You only have to say the word, and we can save you from their fate."

There was heavy silence in the room for a moment.

Virginia stood up, and touched Antony's arm, bringing him away from their captive. "Let me talk to her alone for a little. I can convince her."

He glanced back and forth to Claudia, then back to Virginia as he mulled it over. "...alright. But don't be afraid to say we need to get rid of her," he said as he opened the door behind him.

Once Antony was gone, Virginia's mask of strength faded. She looked at Claudia with begging eyes.

She knelt down beside the chair like she had before and reached back to take her hand. "You've got to listen to me, Claudia. Antony will kill you if you don't agree to help us," she said urgently.

"Well, you could always help me escape," Claudia replied flatly.

"I'm sorry. But I can't do that."

"That's unfortunate."

There was a bitter look on Virginia's face. "I know who your creator is."

Claudia snapped back to attention at that. "What?!"

Virginia swallowed. "His name is Atticus Permisc. And he's the Censor of Caeruleus."

"The Censor of Caeruleus? Really?"

"You don't believe me?"

"Yeah, because it doesn't make any sense. The censor is some old politician or bureaucrat."



Virginia retrieved a newspaper from an armchair by the door and presented the front page. And right there was a picture of him, beneath a headline about new labor laws.

Claudia stared at the photograph in disbelief. That was him. The one she had traveled with to the forest's edge, the one she had seen in her vision in Sylvania. Albeit with neater hair.

"If the Burning Fasces found out about this, your loyalties would be called into question. Even if you were able to go back to them, they might kill you for being associated with someone like that in the government."

"I wouldn't blame them," replied Claudia. "And I'm still not going to help you hurt them."

"I understand what it's like. I'm a Paphonian, just like you. Antony made me and gave me this mission, and I know that you might feel like the mission of the Burning Fasces' is your mission, but that will only end in disaster."

Claudia frowned.

"They're using you!" Virginia continued. "And when they're done, it'll mean one of two things will have happened. Either they'll lose and all be dead, or they'll win, Caeruleus will be destroyed and then they won't have any further use for you."

"Are you sure I'm the one being used here?" asked Claudia coldly.

Virginia fell quiet at that.

"I chose to be a part of the Burning Fasces. I choose to be an Anarchist. Did you choose to be a part of this? To be a part of that bastard's plan?"

"You have no idea what you're talking about," replied Virginia under her breath.

"Really?! And you do? You understand why you'll let me die if I refuse to give up my friends? You understand that you could have done whatever you wanted? You could have chosen your loyalty to the Burning Fasces. You could have left this city and



gone far away. You could have opened up a Veritas damned deli cooperative for all I care! You were one of the Burning Fasces. You were an Anarchist! And if you ever learned anything from Traj and the others you should have learned that when you have freedom, you don't let anybody take it away! And if you don't have it, you fight until you do."

Virginia flinched at the mention of Traj, earning Claudia's further suspicion.

The captive leaned forward as far as she could, somehow looking more powerful and vindictive than the one who had bound her.

"...do you know what happened to Traj?"

Virginia looked down and said nothing, her silence confessing volumes.

"What happened to him?" she pressed further only to be met muteness once again.

"Where is he? Tell me!"

Virginia dared not look her former comrade-in-arms in the eye, but a whisper slipped through her lips, so quiet that Claudia couldn't hear it.

"What did you say?"

There was a long pause.

"...he's dead," she said finally. "Antony killed him."

Slowly, she looked back to Claudia. Her expression was blank.

"Were you there? Did you see it?" she asked, as if she wanted to hope that it wasn't true, though there was no reason to doubt it.

Virginia nodded timidly.

"You were there...and you didn't stop it?! You didn't try to save him? I-I thought...I thought you loved him..."

"Just shut up!" she shouted, trying to drown her shame with the loudness of her words.



“How could you...how could you...”

It looked as though her words were acid to Virginia, who retreated until her back was pressed against the door.

“Traitor. Traitor!” Claudia screeched, having nothing else to say. There was nothing left inside of her except the broken feeling of betrayal, and she had to get it out. She could feel tears dripping down her cheeks from the tightness in her eyes, but she didn’t care. “*Traitor!*”

The door opened from behind Virginia, and she almost fell but was caught by Antony’s firm grip.

“Time to get rid of her, I suppose,” he said flatly.

Virginia’s eyes widened. “No! Wait. She’s just in a bit of shock. Let’s wait until she calms down,” she said over the sound of Claudia’s shouts.

Antony crossed his arms skeptically. “You sure about that?”

“Please. Just imagine what an advantage it would be to have another Paphonian on our side.”

He sighed and pinched the bridge his nose. “Look, I’ll give you a couple days. I have faith in you. But this can’t go on for too long.”

He leaned back into the hallway and pointed at something. “Hey you! Yeah you! Put the apricot down and get over here.”

Once that order was given, he pushed Virginia aside and grabbed the gag he had earlier discarded.

Claudia ignored him. “*Traitor! You traitor!*” she kept shouting at Virginia.

He hit her across the face, stunning her long enough for him to force the gag in again.

A Praetorian guard entered, wiping his hands on his pants. “Sir?” he said, looking to Antony for instructions.

“Yes, just sit down here. This girl is a powerful magician who can probably destroy this building and everyone in it if we let





her. Get your gun out, point at her, and if she moves, grunts, talks, or hums, then shoot her!”

“Uh...alright, sir.”

Antony smiled one last smile to Claudia. “I hope you make the right choice,” he said as he slammed the door shut, hiding Virginia’s face from her former friend for good.

Claudia closed her eyes tight, her cheek still stinging from Antony’s parting blow.

Reluctantly, the guard took his gun from his holster, and cocked the hammer. “Well, can’t say I’m really sorry about this, because I ain’t after what I’ve seen what some of your friends did in that factory lot. It ain’t nothing personal neither. But I will shoot you right in the temple if I have to.”

Claudia shot him a glare.

As if he could stop her. She was going to find a way to escape, and when she did, she was going to raze this place, whatever it was, to the ground. She was going to avenge Trajan. And she would stop Antony’s and Virginia’s plan by whatever means necessary.

With her index finger she traced a word on the back of her seat. And when she was done she gently pressed her palm against it.

She repeated this process over and over again, knowing she had plenty of time to learn the old Sylvanian technique.

She focused all her fury and her sense of everything wrong with the world into that word, trying to give it power.

“*T...R...A...I...T...O...R...*” she spelled out in her head as she traced it once again.



## Chapter Forty One

### Open Secrets

**A**fter getting permission from Praetor Germanicus, the first telegram Quintus sent was to a military Tribune that was an old friend of his father. The Praetorian Guard couldn't be trusted to lead an inquiry into itself, so he had decided to get investigators from a third party.

The Military Tribune agreed to send a unit from Camp Invigilus, complete with several members of the Military Police. That was yesterday, Quintus expected their arrival in the evening today.

In the meantime, he decided to pay Atticus a visit to update him on the situation.

He entered the Censor's office with his usual confident chipper but paused when he heard a loud crack: the sound of something hitting a desk hard.

Both Clemens and Flora jumped to their feet, glaring at the other.

"Stop it, Victoria!" shouted Flora.

"Only if you do first, Caligula!" Clemens shouted back.

Quintus cocked an eyebrow, unsure what the secretaries' conflict was, why it had perturbed them to such a degree, or why they were calling each other names typical of the opposite gender.

"Decorum! Please!" exclaimed Atticus' voice from the inner office.

"But she..."

"And he..."

A disappointed silence radiated from the Censor's desk.



“Yes, Censor Permisc,” they said finally as they both slowly sat back down.

“Oh...Tribune Aurelius, go right in,” said Clemens with embarrassment as he noticed the visitor. “Censor Permisc was expecting you.”

Quintus nodded, and proceeded onward.

Atticus' face brightened when he saw him. “Quintus!” he said as he stood up eagerly.

“Yes, it is I,” he replied, smiling. “Just wanted to go over the game plan with you.”

“Well, considering our long term goal to overreach our political limits so we get kicked out of the Senate building I think we’re right on track. As far as logistical steps go, I went ahead and checked all of Tros’ facts. Something was definitely up that night. I had to bribe one of the patrolmen a hundred Sesterces, but I found out that a secret notice was put out by the Tribune of Justice to report back any sightings of magicians in the Plebian District.”

“Excellent work! We should have several legionnaires at our service by the end of the day. But beyond that, we should focus on finding whoever that person in the photograph is, and gather what evidence of corruption we can along the way. As the Tribune of the Plebs, I should head the inquiry, but I’ve told the men to expect your help. Although, if you want to concentrate on the developments with the labor laws, I understand.”

“Nah,” said Atticus, shaking his head. “I can handle both.”

“I’m sure you can,” said Quintus assuredly. He glanced towards the two secretaries behind him. “Just seems like you’ve got a lot to deal with, outside and inside this office.”

Atticus nodded lightly. “Hey Quintus...” he said.

“Yeah?”

“I just, um, wanted to say that I really love working like this...with you.”



Quintus paused for a moment. “Glad to hear it.” He gave a small smile. “Be sure to get some rest though. Don’t want you wearing yourself thin.”

“I imagine you’ve got a lot of stuff to get in order for tonight. Do you need any help?” Atticus asked.

“I’ve got it, but I’ll let you know if anything changes,” replied Quintus, turning to leave.

“Alrighty. I’ll be here,” said Atticus.

Quintus navigated Clemens and Flora’s field of glares, and left the office with his hands stuffed thoughtfully in his pockets.

He made his way back towards the People’s Department ignoring the other bureaucrats. When he felt a hand gently tap his shoulder, he was taken by surprise.

“Can I help you?” he asked, glancing back.

There stood a Praetorian Guard, wearing the old-fashioned uniform of the Senate Building sentinels. He was sweating profusely.

“You’re Tribune Aurelius, right?” he asked.

Quintus looked to either end of the hall, and realized they were alone. “...yes,” he said, uneasy with the disconcerting situation.

“I have confession to make,” said the guard, fidgeting in place.

“Could we continue this conversation in my office?” asked Quintus.

“Yes sir, of course,” he replied. “Lead the way.”

And so Quintus brought him to the People’s Department, sat him down in front of his desk, and listened to his story. He found it to be fascinating.

The guard claimed that he had been a part of a detail of Praetorian Guards assigned to the protection of Antony Purpura. He had just been the doorman for the Department of Justice, but a few months ago, he saved the life of Marcus Ursacille, the Tribune



of Justice, from an assassination attempt. Then, about a week ago he was pulled to the side along with a dozen other veteran guards, and told there was a special job for him. He was alright with it for a while, until they started having him do more unusual stuff.

Spying on businessmen, Senators, and even a random factory in the industrial district. All under the direction of Antony Purpura.

He hadn't dared question his superior's directive to follow Purpura's instructions to the letter. But sometimes he would hear Antony talking, saying how something big was going to happen to the Senate and Caeruleus, and describing how he took delight in the recent deaths of others.

Then they got a telegram for the Tribune, ordering the discrete capture of a girl doing magic in the Plebian District. Nothing about that felt right to him. When the others beat her, something twisted up inside his stomach. And when he found out they were leaving her with Purpura and not arresting her, he knew something was wrong.

It wasn't until he saw an article about her kidnapping in the Avian Hill Journal, and heard the rumors about an audit from the People's Department, did he realize what he had to do.

"I will testify against them, Mr. Aurelius, with all the things I did and saw for your inquiry. But I need to know that I'll be protected, and kept anonymous," he said, the armpits of his uniform now stained with the sweat that had gathered over the length of his tale.

At this, Quintus had stood up and was smiling thinly to himself in bemusement. "Antony Purpura...really? Now I honestly didn't see that coming. Surely he could have found a better hobby than conspiring against the government."

"What about my protection?" asked the guard, pressing earnestly.

Quintus waved his hand dismissively. "Oh, you've got it. I just can't believe that Antony's come to this. He was my classmate



not too long ago. And to think he's gotten involved in this kidnapping scheme and who knows what else...No matter, I should start making arrangements to free that poor girl and arrest the conspirators. Besides kidnapping, what charges do you figure we could lay on him? I'll be asking for a warrant in a bit."

"I don't know," he said, his shoulders sagging down as he thought about it. "...he did throw a taffy wrapper on the sidewalk one time, that's at least a 20 Sesterce fine. Oh, and I'm not sure if this is strictly illegal, but he talked about wanting this one guy dead. Someone pretty high up in the Senate Building actually. The Censor, Atticus I think his name was."

The bemused smile faded from Quintus' face. "Atticus?" he asked with a new intensity. "Atticus Permisc, you're absolutely sure?"

The guard nodded dumbly, taken aback by his sudden seriousness.

Quintus closed his eyes and thought hard for a moment, formulating what he had to do.

And then, he began to execute.

"I'm sorry, but I'm going to have to get back to you," he said to the guard, making to leave immediately. "You can stay here if you like, I'll tell my secretary Sestia to get you something from the cafeteria if you're hungry. I have urgent business to attend to."

"Wait—" the guard called after him, but Quintus kept on going, walking like a man on a mission.

He was just about to barge out of the office when he found himself face to face with a tall muscular man in a gold and blue non-combat Legionnaire uniform. He was holding his officer's hat by his side with an air of conviction; his hair was ink black and combed with military precision.

"Could you point me to Tribune Aurelius, son?" he asked, looking over him into the office.

"Speaking," Quintus replied promptly.



“Oh. My apologies, sir,” he said, as he extended his hand towards him. “Captain Agrippa Ilius.”

“Quintus Aurelius,” Quintus said, shaking his hand briskly.

“I understand there’s a problem with the Praetorian Guard that requires my assistance,” said the Captain.

“Yes,” he replied, exiting the department. “If you’d follow me, I can brief you on the way to the nearest Magistrate. But first I need to know if the other men have arrived from Camp Invigilus.”

“They’re arriving presently.”

“Good, because once I get to the magistrate, you’re going to mobilize them.”

Ilius looked to him with surprise. “Today?”

“Yes, Captain, or tomorrow morning at the latest. And make sure they’re armed.”

“Where are we mobilizing to, precisely?”

“The house of Antony Purpura. In the Senatorial District.”

Ilius furrowed his brow. “...alright sir.” He cleared his throat. “I was told that we would also be working with the Censor. Will he be with us on this expedition?”

Quintus paused.

He swallowed. “No,” he said, continuing on his way. “No need to risk it.”



## Chapter Forty Two

### An Altercation

Antony walked past the group of Praetorian Guards lounging in his kitchen yawning and scratching his scalp through uncombed hair. He sent them a sparing glance as he retrieved a glass of water.

They were the core of elite guards Marcus had handpicked to help implement their plan. Their loyalty to Marcus was unquestionable, and they each had a high work ethic. But that didn't mean he had to enjoy them staying at his mansion. One of them kept eating all the pepper-jack cheese and salami.

Marcus had said their presence was for his own security. He'd originally refused, but the surprise visit of Trajan Catulli had changed his mind. Now they even had a Praetorian armored car out back.

Today was a very important day, although it was probably more important to Virginia. Today was the final day for Claudia to renounce the Anarchists or die. He expected Virginia would already be waiting in the room where they kept her captive. He didn't understand the reason she insisted on keeping her alive this long. But then, he supposed he had to give her some leeway. As his Paphonian, she was probably just doing what he would do in the situation.

He hummed a patriotic tune to himself as he walked with a peppy step up to his room, where he slipped his gun holster onto his belt, and checked to make sure his gun was fully loaded. Once he was sure there was a bullet in all six chambers, he put on a





black jacket, fixed his collar, and made his way to where his servant and his captive were waiting.

Virginia looked startled face he threw the door open. “Good morning to all!” he exclaimed, grinning as he pulled the armchair by the door front and center so he could sit facing Claudia.

“Has an accord been reached?” he asked.

Virginia, who had been sitting on the ground by Claudia’s side, tried to subtly wipe a tear away from her eye. Antony noticed, but he didn’t let it show in any way besides a slight tick in his hand towards his revolver.

“I’ve been...” Virginia began, trying to explain her position.

“Trying to convince her to agree to our terms, I’m sure,” said Antony.

Claudia just looked down, ignoring them.

“So what do you say, Claudia. Have you thought about taking your friend’s advice?”

“You kidnapped me and killed Traj, why should I do anything for you?” she replied.

Virginia shot up to her feet, staring down Claudia with a newfound anger. “Just do it you idiot!”

“No,” Claudia said calmly. “I won’t.”

Virginia shook her head in bitter frustration. “You can’t do this to me...”

Antony rolled his eyes, and rubbed his ear as if to rub away their obnoxious shouting. “Come on. What else is a Paphonian without their creator like you supposed to do, anyway?”

“But I do have a creator,” replied Claudia, some confusion in her voice. “I know who he is.”

“Really?” asked Antony, figuring she was trying to be smart with him. “And what’s his name?”

“Atticus Permisc.”

Antony blinked. “What did you say?”



“...Atticus Permisc...the Censor...”

In an instant, Antony was at his feet, drawing his revolver.

“Yeah. You’re going to die.” He said grimacing viciously.

He cocked the hammer of the gun.

This time, Virginia made no objection.

But before he could pull the trigger, the resounding impact of an explosion from his front door and the subsequent sound of gunfire distracted him.

“Sir!” exclaimed a Praetorian Guard, running down the hallway. “The Legion is raiding us. We need to get you out of here!”

“Wait just a sec. I want to shoot her first,” he replied, even as the Guard grabbed him by his arm.

But before he could re-aim the gun, there was a bright flash of light from within the room.

Claudia’s magic blasted her restraints to shreds. She jumped to her feet, her arms now free, and hoisted the chair above her head. With a yell she used it as a battering ram, pushing everyone out of the room. They didn’t have a chance to push back before she slammed the door shut and locked it.

“Sir, just leave the girl, it’s too late!” said the Guard as Antony tried to fire through the door.

“Just one sec!” He only succeeded in sending two shots into the door frame with his balance thrown off.

The Guard grunted in frustration and resorted to half dragging him down the hallway as Virginia led them down, the knife she strapped to her ankle now withdrawn. They were able to turn the corner just as legionnaire bullets blew the paintings and crown molding on the wall to bits.

“Dammit...” Antony muttered. “That little bitch really deserved to die...”

The mansion was in chaos. Bullets and clashing uniforms were flying every which way. A retreat to the armored car around



back was ordered, and eventually, after running and returning fire sporadically, they made it to the servant's entrance. It was just a small sprint to the car from there.

Virginia and the guards were the first out.

They weren't there when the door was kicked in behind them, so Antony was the only one to whirl around with his gun raised in defense.

Facing him down was Quintus Aurelius wielding a pistol, a determined glint in his eye as he pointed the gun straight at his target's chest.

"Quintus?!" Antony exclaimed.

"Put your weapon down," he ordered. "You are under arrest."

Antony grinned. "Nice try. But I've got a gun too. You take one step closer, I pull this trigger, and then we all go down in a hail of lead."

"You would prefer to die than come in peacefully?" Quintus asked, sounding more curious than shocked.

"Oh come on, Quintus. We both know you couldn't kill anyone. You care too much."

Antony's former schoolmate blinked, and then his face darkened. He moved the aim of his gun from Antony's chest to right between his eyes.

"You're right. I do care too much. And I will do anything to protect the people I care about."

"Well that's unfortunate," said Antony, frowning. "Keep that attitude up and you might just end up dead."

He was not about to lose this game of chicken. He couldn't risk jeopardizing his plan by being captured and allowing himself to be a bargaining piece.

He slowly began to squeeze down on his trigger.

But in the nick of time, as things tended to happen today, a silver blur came flying through the servant's entrance and struck



Quintus in the hand. The gun went off as it was pushed just far enough to the side to miss its intended target.

Virginia, who had thrown her knife at Quintus, grabbed Antony's hand. She pulled him into the outside world, and together they ran to the Praetorian car that was all revved up and ready for escaping. They clamored in, and the car sped off with a start. Knowing that the front entrance was already swarming with legionnaires, they drove straight through the wooden fence between the Pupura property and the road.

Once the house was out of sight, Antony slammed his fists on the dashboard. "I can't believe they were able to find us so soon! We have to move our timetables up a notch. Virginia, we're starting phase two."

She nodded. "I promise they won't know what hit them."



## Chapter Forty Three

### The Homefront

Serena was out of breath when she threw open the front door to her father's house and stepped hurriedly into the atrium. She was still in her blue cap uniform since she'd been in such a rush to leave after she heard the news.

"Dad! Dad!" she called as loud as she could while trying to catch her breath. "Are you here?!"

There was a clatter in the distance, and then the sound of feet padding towards her.

"Serena?" asked Mr. Aurelius as he bumbled towards her, still holding a turkey leg from his interrupted dinner. "What's all this commotion?"

"I was so worried!" exclaimed Serena as she hugged him tightly.

"Well, I'm quite alright. Care to tell me what this is about?" he asked, hugging her back carefully so he didn't get any of the garum sauce he smothered the turkey with on her.

"They told me there was a gunfight in the middle of the Senatorial District! The valetudinarium had to send eight ambulances—" she stopped as the door behind her reopened.

She turned to see Quintus on the threshold, whom she instantly ran up to and embraced as well. But she paused her affections when she felt something hard and metal protruding from the back of his beltline. "Is that a gun?" she asked in disbelief.

Just then, she noticed the woman standing behind him with a bruise across her cheek. "And who's that?"



“Serena...I didn’t know you were coming to pay us a visit...” said Quintus, in a futile attempt to escape the line of questioning.

“Well, I’m here now and I’m asking what you’re doing here with a gun and that girl.”

“You see....it’s somewhat complicated...”

“First I hear there is a shoot-out in the middle of the Senatorial District, then you show up with a gun. Have I reason to believe they are connected?” she asked impatiently.

He sighed. “Yes, I was at the fight,” he admitted. “There was a rogue group of Praetorian Guards and I was in charge of the Legionnaire task force going to arrest them. When we arrived and told them to surrender themselves, they opened fire. A few guards got away, but fortunately all the Legionnaires are alright. This girl, Claudia, was kidnapped by them for reasons I don’t fully understand and cannot disclose. There are no guarantees they won’t come after her again, so I brought her here where she’ll be safe.”

Serena frowned and positioned herself squarely in his way, barring entrance to the house. “You could have gotten yourself killed! Not to mention you actually succeeded in killing three people. I could have sworn you were chosen to be the Tribune of the Plebs not, a Centurion. What were you thinking? You know what, I don’t care what you’re thinking. Just stop! Stop this before anyone else dies, like Atticus or Dad or me. And why on earth would you bring her here? We can hardly keep a hungry raccoon out of this place, much less the Praetorian Guard. All you’re doing is putting you and our father in danger.”

“Serena,” he said, lowering his voice, “this is important. Claudia graciously agreed to testify to help put these people away for good, and I have a responsibility to keep her safe. The Praetorian Guard will probably be able to reach pretty much anywhere if they tried, but this is probably the only place they won’t think to look.”



Serena was about to rebuke him once more, but when she looked back at the girl behind him, she reconsidered. The bruise across her cheek wasn't the only one she had, and her wrists were nearly raw from where they had been bound. But despite all that, she appeared remarkably unfazed; the only things that gave away any distress were her tired and red eyes. Serena could see a passive strength within her.

She had been kidnapped, held against her will, and Serena didn't even have the slightest understanding of what had transpired during her captivity. Who was she to turn her away?

Serena bit her lip, and turned back to her father. "Are you alright with this?" she asked.

He shrugged. "Sure. As I understand it, I would be doing a great service to the republic." He looked to Claudia. "And, young miss, I assure you you'll be safe here."

Quintus smiled, and herded Claudia into the atrium. She glanced idly to the grand architecture around her.

"You can stay in the guest bedroom," Quintus said, guiding her on.

Serena followed. "I should probably take a look at those bruises," she said.

"And I shall procure some food for our young guest," declared Mr. Aurelius, heading back towards the dining room.

Once Claudia was situated in the dusty old guest room, sitting on the rose patterned quilts of the bed, Serena began her examination.

"Tribune Aurelius-," she began, ignoring the blue cap lifting up the sleeve of her shirt.

"Call me Quintus," he said.

She hesitated. "...Quintus...you really think this will stop whatever they're planning?"

"Of course. Obviously the main tools of their scheme would be the Praetorians, with your testimony and the evidence we were



able to gather from the Purpura mansion, we'd definitely be able to arrest the Tribune of Justice, and once we find Antony, he'll be put in jail too," he promised.

"Good..." she said, nodding her head.

Serena looked up from examining the bruise on her arm, "How much do these hurt?"

Claudia shrugged. "Not much. I haven't thought about them really."

"Did they cause any other injury to you?" she asked.

"No, most of it was from when they caught me. I had a nasty headache for a while, but it's gone now. I'm fine, really."

"Alright," said Serena, standing up. "I think there's some medicine at the valetudinarium that can help you too."

When their father returned with a plate of food, Serena began to lead Quintus back out into the hallway.

"Thank you," said Claudia, before they left, "for your hospitality."

Quintus smiled. "Don't mention it."

Serena closed the door to the room as her father gave Claudia the plate. She looked to Quintus with a worried gaze. "What are you getting yourself into?" she asked softly.

"It's something important," he said.

"But what if you get hurt? Or what if they hurt Atticus? Would you be able to forgive yourself if you lost him? I don't think I could if I lost you. These people, they're dangerous...they have guns and soldiers."

Quintus shook his head and looked off to the side. "They aren't going to hurt Atticus, or you, or Dad, or that girl, Claudia. I'm not going to let them. And I can look after myself fine too. I have to."

Serena hugged her brother for the second time that night and sighed into his shoulder. "No...you really don't..."





He said nothing in reply, and she knew that his mind was already set.

“Just be careful, Quintus,” she told him.



## Chapter Forty Four

### The Fall of the Senate

It had been only three days since the raid on the Purpura mansion and the evidence of corruption had sent waves not just in the Senate Building, but throughout the entire country.

The headlines from the shootout and subsequent developments were on the front page of every newspaper. Every scrap of information was seized by the ravenous public and devoured.

It was more than scandal: it was the Praetorian Guard being put on trial with every citizen as a juror.

As for Antony, Virginia, and the eight rogue guards they escaped with, they were the subject of the biggest manhunt in the modern history of Caeruleus City. The Legion had called in nearly half a cohort to search for them, and it was general consensus that they wouldn't last the week.

The Senate was beginning its formal inquiry into the matter today, and the docket was booked with testimonies. Everyone from the Legion investigators to Marcus Ursacille to Felix Catulli was there.

After learning from Claudia how Trajan had died, Quintus had gone to Felix and gently informed him about his son's fate.

At first he was silent. At first he couldn't believe it.

Yet, he knew the dangerous work of his son, and more importantly, he knew cruelty. That was enough for him to accept the truth.



As much as Trajan had disappointed him with violence, he still loved him. He was all Felix had left. And now, even he was gone.

It wasn't long before he was consumed by something other than disbelief: boiling hot hatred.

Hate for the industrialists, the Praetorians, the aristocrats, and all the stupid Anarchists that caused Trajan's death.

If Felix had been more like his son he would have decided, right then and there, to kill them all. He was still going to take action, but he was going to do it his way.

He was going to testify. And he was going to tell all those politicians about the man who was Trajan Catulli, about what the Praetorians had allowed to happen to his family, and for the first time in his life, he felt they might actually listen.

As for the politicians of Caeruleus, there were two in particular who had their thoughts centered on things much more personal than the politics of the day.

One was the smug looking Pliny, who was currently enjoying the euphoria of sweet success. The Praetorian Guard's corruption was something that had the tacit support of the industrialists for years now, something everybody knew. With these new developments, the amount of political capital he could gain for attacking Marcus Ursacille and the industrialists would be astronomical. Not to mention how much he could piss Tarquin off with it.

Consul Tarquin, however, was having a new, intimate experience with the emotion of dread.

Over the past month, three of the members of the Decemvirate Council had died under mysterious circumstances. Tarquin didn't know who was behind it, although he had his suspicions. As if the deaths weren't bad enough, now the whole world was watching Antony's plan fall apart. If anybody found a



link to the Council, his career would certainly be destroyed in the subsequent political firestorm. He could lose his seat in the Senate. He could lose his company. Or worse, they could charge him with treason and leave him to rot in a rusty prison along with petty criminals. Pliny would probably have a field day with it too.

He wasn't about to chance that. So he prepared a travel itinerary and packed a suit case. A nice long vacation on foreign shores was in order. Everything was set for him to leave in two days.

Quintus Aurelius stood by the rear doors of the Senate Floor near the Press Corps' desks, smiling to himself as he observed everyone get into place. This was the fruit of his labors.

After Felix, Claudia was next to testify. He'd managed to keep her safe, but her identity was to be kept anonymous just in case. That was why she was waiting in the other hallway, away from the others set to speak.

He had informed Atticus what happened at the Purpura mansion and how he saved the girl who'd been kidnapped the morning after everything went down. Atticus had been surprised, for a multitude of reasons, but he congratulated him on the progress, and also for taking Antony down a peg.

Quintus was still worried about Antony running free; every day that went without his capture was another day he might hurt someone. Although, Captain Ilius assured him he would be caught soon.

If everything went well today, if the Tribune of Justice was brought down, if all the corruption was exposed, and Antony's conspiracy was dissolved, then he would have succeeded. His responsibility to protect would be satisfied, for the moment at least. Serena might have thought he was overextending himself, that the load was too big for him to carry. But when it was for those he loved, that load became a little lighter.



Atticus Permisc was positively giddy and negatively anxious as he walked, holding his briefcase, to the Senate Floor.

He had spent all of last night preparing with Clemens, Flora, and Quintus for his testimony. Every single one of his facts had to be straight if he wanted to not screw this up. Oddly enough, this was the second time the future of the country was going to be influenced by his speech in front of the Senate. He wasn't sure how he felt about that.

He was sure that he hated Antony now even more than when he was in school. There were times when he had been truly afraid of him. But now, he wondered if the shoe was on the other foot.

"Hey Quintus!" he called out as he entered the Senate Floor and saw his friend. "Is everything on schedule?"

"It is indeed. Everyone who is going to testify is here, and the last of the Senators just filed in. Well, everyone except Tribune Ursacille, he stepped out to get some last minute legal help. Although I doubt it will do him much good. I asked Captain Ilius to send a man to make sure he comes back on time," replied Quintus. "You feel like you're ready?"

"I think so. I even got a decent bit of sleep last night, like you suggested."

"Good," he said, sincerely. "You're probably going to need it."

As Quintus spoke, Tros Euxin walked onto the Senate floor and set his bag onto his desk next to the other reporters.

"Proud of yourself, Tros?" asked one of his colleagues, grinning as he clicked his ballpoint pen and flipped open his notebook. "Been keeping us all busy ever since you dug up that story about the girl who got kidnapped."



“More than you’d ever believe, Cerberus,” he said, withdrawing a camera from his bag and loading it with film. When he was done, he approached Atticus and Quintus.

“Hello gentlemen,” he said brightly, “A beautiful day for upheaval, don’t you think?”

“Couldn’t agree more, Mr. Euxin,” said Quintus.

“Sorry we can’t give you any more statements,” said Atticus, remembering everything they’d rehearsed yesterday. “We’re saving everything until we take the stand.”

“Oh, I know. I just wanted to thank you two, for bringing this as far as it has,” he told them. “I was just about to go out front and take some photographs of the protests outside, and I thought I should say it before things got too hectic.”

Atticus cocked his head in intrigue. “Protests?”

“Oh, yes. There must be a couple thousand people out there, all to protest against the Praetorian Guard and the Tribune of Justice.”

“And this time I had nothing to do with it!” Quintus said proudly. “Directly, anyway.”

“I’d like to take a look at that. Do you figure I have enough time?” he asked Quintus.

“Go ahead,” he said with a smile. “I’ve got everything under control.”

“In that case, I think I’ll join you, Mr. Euxin,” said Atticus.

“Excellent,” said Tros, leading the way.

Claudia the Paphonian sat on a bench in the hallway on the opposite side of the Senate from where Quintus and Atticus were. She wore an expensive yellow dress Serena had loaned her, and she wished she had her yoyo with her to calm her nerves.

When she had thought about ways to stop Antony and Virginia’s plot, this hadn’t been anywhere on the list. But that man, Tribune Aurelius, had convinced her it would be sufficient.



She had been suspicious of him at first, but there was something about the way he talked to her that felt honest and genuine. Eventually, she had agreed to the testimony, but not just because of Antony and Virginia.

If Atticus really was the Censor, then the only place she'd be able to find him for sure would be the Senate Building. Maybe he'd be there, watching her testimony. She wrung her hands and blushed at the prospect that he'd see her.

She wasn't quite sure what she'd say to him. She just knew that they had to talk.

One other thing she was certain about was that it would take nothing short of a natural disaster for her to leave the building without seeing him.

The idea that she was about to testify before the Senate of Caeruleus was surreal to her. Through the open double doors she could see the gleaming sapphire of the ceiling dome, the pale white togas of the senators, and the sheer opulence of the Senate Building. This was the kind of place the Anarchists despised. Personally, she couldn't find it within herself to hate it, even if she thought it was wasteful and imbued with arrogance.

She knew, probably from the knowledge Atticus gave her when she was made, about the history of the Senate. She remembered the great revolution it participated in all those years ago, as the champion of democracy. The Anarchists felt that the time for great revolutions was still upon them; she wondered what they would do to this place.

The hallway she was in was mostly clear since everybody had migrated onto the Senate Floor. There were the two Praetorian Guards traditionally stationed by the door, but as soon as the last Senator entered, they made to leave.

Claudia watched them, confused. There didn't seem to be anybody coming to relieve them. She peered down the hall to see



if anybody else was coming when she heard footsteps coming from the other direction. Hard, deliberate footsteps.

The sound stopped when Claudia turned to see who it was.

The two stared, frozen, at each other.

There was a single moment of silence, just one, before Virginia spoke, and when she did, she didn't do so to address Claudia.

"We were the king's men, sent on the king's mission. But I was not a soldier, I was killer, as simple as that. And I took joy from my work. So when I stepped to the shores of the great city of Surmona Arx, I went straight and without a doubt."

A deep red glow began to gather around Virginia's silhouette. Claudia's eyes widened as she realized what her plan was.

"No, Virginia, you can't do this!" she pleaded, getting to her feet.

Virginia ignored her. "I began my own crusade throughout the city. That which held, in its core, a war in itself. For every pair of eyes that fell upon me, new blood fell. The red stained the streets. And between the fire and metal that flew through the air, I was much the deadlier."

Claudia lunged in panic, aiming to strike her in the chest. But Virginia only stepped back, and retaliated with a stronger blow, knocking the wind out of her.

"With each cry, I grew more resolute! For it was then I knew that I was not the king's man, or the soldier's man, I was death's man himself. And I watched my handiwork unfold."

Claudia picked herself up quickly and thrust her elbow as hard as she could; hitting Virginia in her chin.

Virginia paused, and wiped away the thin line of blood that began to drip down her neck before narrowing her eyes. She grabbed Claudia by her hair and forcefully threw her to the ground.





Claudia's head collided against the sapphire wall with a resounding thunk. She didn't move after that.

Virginia hesitated for just a second, sparing a glance to the fallen girl, but soon positioned herself in the open door to the Senate Floor, her thick red aura growing blood dark.

"For king and country, they told me once. But I know better. Death I claim you as my king, if you claim me as your servant. *For as I watched it all burn before my eyes, I swear I heard my Master laugh!*"

All the hustle and bustle inside came to a screeching halt as every head turned to the source of the bizarre exclamation.

Slowly, the blood red air around Virginia began to move like tendrils of smoke. They drifted into the Senate Floor, shining in eerie contrast to the blue filtered light coming from the sun, and stopped once they reached the center of the room.

Then, they exploded.

The waves of scarlet energy ripped the stands of the Senators to splinters. The several-thousand-year-old desk was smashed against the wall, smashing Julius Germanicus and tossing the two Consuls along with it. The desks of the Senatorial Press Corps were equally flattened between the building and their users; the reporters' bones cracking just as easily as the old wood. The pages of their notebooks were torn out and flapped in the violent wind.

The deep blue walls trembled with a deafening crack of sound as bodies were thrown in the air, their limbs caught at odd angles. The force was too much for the sapphire dome, and with all the reverberation of an earthquake, it shattered like a pane of glass.

Shards of precious crystal shot up into the sky. They went higher and higher, gleaming in the sunlight, until there was no power left to lift them and they came crashing down.



Some of the broken sapphire landed on flesh, further mangling bodies, some made unmusical noises as they collided against the floor, and some had been crushed into a fine powder that covered everything and everyone like a shining silk funeral shroud.

When it was all settled, limbs and blood were haphazardly scattered and splattered across the room in between what was left of the sapphire ceiling, and splinters of wood.

Virginia regarded the destruction with a cold demeanor. She turned around, looked to Claudia's limp body for a moment, and then left without another word.

The Senate Floor was consumed with deathly silence.

The Consuls Tarquin and Pliny had fallen on top of each other, with a long crystal shard puncturing them both.

Despite their mutual hatred, they had bled to death holding each other's hand.

The body of Felix Catulli was thrown by the force of the explosion out of the room. It was almost as if, even in death, the deceased Senators rejected the poor member of the peasantry, reaching across the threshold with a lifeless arm.

Eventually there came the sound of running feet, and the entrance of Atticus Permisc followed by Tros Euxin.

They surveyed the death with astonishment, edging slowly into the chaos.

Tros knelt down beside the fallen reporters, trying to see if any had survived. None of them had.

Atticus looked at all the empty faces of the dead, for those who still had faces. He treaded carefully, even as sapphire dust and blood gathered on the underside of his boots.

He froze, transfixed mutely on one particular body with a sapphire shard protruding straight from his heart.



Suddenly, he started sprinting towards him. He slid to a stop and dropped to his knees by the dead man's side, ignoring the crystal points digging through his pants and into his skin.

There were mutters of denial on his lips. Half consummated words of refusal, apology, anger, regret, and love.

He grasped his hand and begged for him to come back. He tried to invoke magic, and force the universe to return him. But death gave no concessions to any plea, no matter the beggar's standing with the universe.

After trying everything he could, he could no longer stand to utter another syllable. So he wept openly.

His tears hadn't even begun to dry when Captain Ilius and the legionnaires barged into room, yelling on about things such as perimeter and safety and the wrath of gods. Atticus tried to resist when they started to drag him away, but ultimately, he was removed from the premises.

Now that there was no one grieving over it, the dead body of Quintus Aurelius was cast into the shade as a cloud passed above the Senate Building.



## Chapter Forty Five

### The State of the Republic

There was a hole in the carpet of the Censor's office. It wasn't big, but it broke up the pattern of different colored diamonds and lines.

Atticus was transfixed by it. He had been ever since Captain Ilius had deposited him there. He was sitting on the floor, his back against the front of his desk, and he hadn't moved from that spot, eaten or slept in the day since the explosion.

Clemens and Flora had been there too, for a while. They had been holding hands, looking distressed and confused as the Captain had explained what happened. They tried to ask Atticus questions too, but he said nothing. Eventually, they left together in the late hours of the night with a few words of condolences, leaving Atticus alone in the office.

In the first hours after the cataclysm nothing but questions asking "why" and "how" were repeated in his head, in between the occasional stunned silence and sorrowful lament.

Now, he didn't know what to think, or what to feel. He was just full of emptiness, staring at that spot on the carpet.

Quintus had been there for him nearly all his life. Quintus was the only reason he tried in school. The only reason he had become the Censor. The only reason he was good at anything at all...

It had felt like, sometimes, Quintus was his whole world. Or at least, everything that was good about it. Now with the kindest and most virtuous person in his life dead, his whole world had become that ugly little tear in the carpet.



When Captain Ilius reentered the office, Atticus didn't look up.

He cleared his throat. "Censor Permisc, I have some updates on the situation." He waited for some response from the young Censor, but received nothing.

"As you are probably aware, there has never been an instance since the revolution that Caeruleus has been without a Senate. This tragedy is without precedence, so perhaps I shouldn't have been surprised that no one really knew who was in charge. I did my best to secure the Senate Building, and find the culprits for the explosion. In the process, we discovered that the only non-military tribune who survived was Tribune Ursacille. Everyone else was there to see the testimonies."

Atticus blinked, that name bringing some consciousness back into his head.

"We believe he was the one responsible, and we've put out a warrant for his arrest. Normally, executive powers lie with the Consul. If the Consul dies unexpectedly or is assassinated, there is a line of succession that starts with the Tribune of Justice, then goes to the Tribune of the Interior, and ends with the Tribune of Agriculture. To preserve the civilian chain of command there are no military tribunes allowed in the line of succession. After the tribunes, there are protocols for the Senate to elect a fellow Senator as an interim Consul through a special session. If this is also impossible, the last person in the line of succession is the Censor."

Atticus tilted his head slightly, as if he had heard him wrong. "...w-what?"

Suddenly, Ilius lurched forward, grabbed him by the collar and heaved him up till his angry eyes were leveled with the young Censor's.



“You have executive powers, you stupid bastard! If I could have, I would have just left you here to sulk, but now I’ve got to deal with you and you’ve got to deal with the country.”

“I can’t do that!”

The Captain let him go roughly. “It doesn’t matter what you think you can or cannot do. Caeruleus is counting on you.”

“I don’t know...I don’t know what to do,” he said, shaking his head.

“The Military Tribunes will be taking care of the day to day operations of the government, since you hardly seem up to the task. I’ve been placed as the interim head of the Praetorian Guard, with other Legionnaires assuming senior positions.”

“Does that mean they’re conducting a coup?” asked Atticus, sounding oddly hopeful.

“What? No!”

“Please?”

Ilius narrowed his eyes crossly. “Will you just listen for a second?! If people start thinking the military tribunes are trying to conduct a coup, they might start thinking we were behind the slaughter in the Senate. Right now we need as much calm as we get.” He paused and removed an envelope with an official Senatorial seal on it from his jacket pocket. “I was also asked to deliver this to you.”

Atticus tiredly took the envelope and tore it open. There was a letter inside.

“All the military tribunes have signed it,” he explained. “It’s a promise for free and fair elections of a new Senate in three months’ time. You need to sign it too.” He held out a pen to him.

“Alright,” Atticus said quietly, doing as he was told. “Is that all?”

“Hardly. The Tribune of the Legion and I have arranged to make a speech to the public tomorrow morning. He’ll be speaking about the elections; I’ll be speaking about catching the killers. You



will be expected to give one as well. Keep it short. But be sure to announce a state of emergency, and the placement of the city under martial law.”

“Martial law?” Atticus asked as he sat back down on the floor meekly.

“Yes, sir. And a state of emergency. Nearly all of the country’s power will be vested in you, if you can believe it. We only ask that you allow me and the remaining Tribunes do our jobs without interference. All you have to do is sit back and try not to do anything that causes the country to implode on itself.”

Atticus covered his mouth with the palm of his hand.

“Look,” Ilius said, “I know you’re mourning over the loss of your friend—”

“Did you know Quintus Aurelius?”

“Not very well. But he seemed like a good, honorable man.”

Atticus nodded softly. “I’m sure you would have preferred him to have lived instead of me. He would have made a much better leader.”

“I wouldn’t say that, exactly.”

“Don’t worry. I do too.”

Ilius sighed. “What would he do in your place, then? If he were here, what would he tell you to do?”

Atticus fell silent. He drew his arms tightly around his knees and bowed his head, making himself look small.

He knew what Quintus would say and do if he was there, in that room with him.

A shiver ran down his spine as he imagined, for a moment, a comforting hand on his shoulder, and the words he needed to hear being spoken.

He then began to crawl around his desk, stopping when he was next to his chair. He reached up and snatched an old memo on a menu change in the cafeteria. He started scrawling something on the back with the pen Ilius had given him.



“What are you doing?” asked the Captain.

“Writing the Veritas damned speech,” Atticus grumbled in reply.





## Chapter Forty Six

### The Ears of the Nation

A crowd had gathered in the plaza in front of the Senate Building, and Claudia was among them. She had arrived later than most of the others and was trying to force her way through, as close to the front as she could. There were a handful of disgruntled and annoyed exclamations as she did, but eventually she made it halfway there before the crowd became too thick for her to go any farther.

It was freezing cold out, the coldest day of winter so far, but that hadn't stopped the several thousand people who'd come to hear the speeches of Miles, the Legionary Tribune, Ilius, the interim head of the Praetorian Guard, and Atticus Permisc, the Censor.

Instead of Praetorian Guards, who were traditionally responsible for security around the Senate Building, it was Legionnaires who formed the lines behind the temporary metal barricade that separated the onlookers from the second level of sapphire steps. In front of the tall Corinthian columns was a row of high ranking officers decked out in medals and honors. There was a wooden platform painted blue with a podium on it in front of the main entrance, where there was a gap in the line of soldiers. The two ornate doors of the center entrance were wide open, anticipating the arrival of the three speakers.

It was just the day before last that Claudia had woken up dazed and confused by the steps of the Senate Building, her head aching as Blue Caps, Legionnaires, and Praetorian Guards rushed in and out of building. The nurses had taken her, and all the others



in the nearby rooms who had been injured from the blast, outside to be treated so they wouldn't be in the way of the security forces.

She tried to call out to ask what had happened. But everyone was moving too quickly to answer. It was only once one of the nurses came to treat her that she understood.

He told her that there was an explosion in the Senate Room, and as far as they could tell, no one in the room at the time had survived.

That's when she remembered her fight with Virginia, and she realized the full weight of the day's events.

She asked if he knew if Atticus Permisc was alright. He didn't.

The nurse gave her some medicine and a bag of ice for her head before going to check on some of the other patients.

In all the chaos, Claudia slipped away, walking back to her home in the Plebian District with a blank look in her eyes. When she got there she sat down on her mattress and held her yoyo in her hands. She didn't know what to feel, or what to think.

It wasn't until that night that she took action. She changed her clothes, carefully folding up the dress Serena Aurelius had given her before donning the plebian style garbs and red bandanna that made up her informal Anarchist uniform.

She met Crassus in the hidden lot with the others of the Burning Fases.

"Claudia!" one of them exclaimed, "We'd thought whatever happened to Traj happened to you too. Where were you? We looked everywhere!"

"Traj is dead," she told them simply.

There was shocked silence across the lot.

Despite how much they suspected their revered general had fallen, the news still took them off guard. Traj had been there from the very start. Whenever any of them thought of the Burning Fases or anarchy, they would always think of Traj too.



It wasn't long before the Anarchists were swept with mourning, anger, bitterness, and despair.

Crassus, however, hid his emotions behind a stony mask. He went on to ask about Virginia, since she hadn't been around for several days either.

After a moment of hesitation, Claudia said she had no idea where she was.

There was a thought among the Anarchists that the explosion in the Senate and the ensuing pandemonium could be used to their advantage. News of Traj's death only made them want to take action all the more. But nobody, not even Crassus, knew what to do about it. Yet.

It was later that night when she had discovered Atticus' fate. His picture was in a discarded newspaper she caught tumbling down the road in the wind. As the only civilian leader who had survived the disaster and wasn't on the run, he was set to make a speech the next day.

So there she was, looking up to the top of the rich blue steps with eager eyes.

Eventually, her patience was rewarded. Out of the entrance to the Senate Building came two imposing figures, and a third significantly less so.

Atticus looked more like a child than a head of state in between the burly military men in their blue and gold uniforms. He wore a black suit and his hair was slicked back neatly, and he held his chin up with rigid resolve, if not for his own sake, than for the audience's. The only things that betrayed his composure were the dark bags underneath his eyes.

Instead of trying to push any farther towards the front, Claudia stepped behind the statue of Veritas in the middle of the plaza, as if she was hiding. Blushing, she peeked over one of the stone feet of the statue and looked up attentively.



A legionnaire officer stepped up to the podium. “Salvété omnes,” he called out in a solemnly. The crowd grew quiet. “To the citizens of Caeruleus, I humbly present the Censor, Atticus Permisc.”

He receded, and Atticus came forward.

With the eyes of the country on him, he rested his hands on either edge of the podium. He was silent at first as he surveyed the crowd in front of him. Then, he swallowed.

“Salvété.” His voice was projected with as much strength as he had, and carried over the crowd with modest volume. “I have come, firstly, to deliver a number to you all. A terrible number.

“One hundred and sixty-four. That is one hundred senators. Thirty-two witnesses. Twenty-three civil servants. Six reporters of the Senatorial Press Corp. Two Consuls. And one Praetor. One hundred and sixty four people who died in the name of democracy, justice and the republic.

“The perpetrators of this heinous act may think they have done enough to bring Caeruleus to its knees. That we can be molded to the will of terrorists. They are wrong. Dead wrong. Caeruleus will stand. Caeruleus will endure.

“In three months’ time, free and fair elections will be held. Until then, it will be the responsibility of myself and the military tribunes to ensure the safety and stability of the Republic. To do this, a State of Emergency, Justitium, and martial law have been declared.”

There were some whispers and speculations among the crowd about what this all meant.

“I understand if you are afraid, or if you are uncertain. I too fear for the fate of the country in the coming weeks, but I am certain about the strength of our people and their ability to overcome adversity. You might have questions about these measures. And while the People’s Department will be preparing a



notice for public distribution, I will do my best to answer some of them now.

“What do each of these measures entail?”

“The State of Emergency places all government agencies on a heightened awareness and allows for the executive to divert funds and resources to address pressing situations. The Justitium, which initiated the laws of succession, gives executive and legislative powers to the Censor. And the declaration of martial law, which is currently only encompassing Caeruleus City, puts law enforcement under the legion’s responsibilities.

“How long will the measures last?”

“The State of Emergency will end with the beginning of elections, in three months’ time. Justitium will last until the first session of the new Senate. And martial law, which will be crucial to bringing those who committed this atrocity to justice, will end when either all the conspirators are caught, or when elections end.

“Now, you may still ask, what of our freedoms, and all the values we hold dear? Will these measures hurt them? No, I assure you they will not.

“Will there be freedom?”

“Yes, there will be.

“Will there be justice?”

“Yes, there will be.

“Will there be safety?”

“Yes, there will be.

“Will there be peace?”

“If we stay united as a nation, there will be peace.”

He paused, and the crowd shouted and clapped in roarious assent.

When they were done, he continued. “I gave you a number earlier. But numbers are deceiving. The truth is, it wasn’t the loss of a Senate, a reporter, a civil servant, or a consul that was so tragic. It was the loss of humanity. It was how those men and



women will never greet their families with love, laugh with a friend, or so much as enjoy greasy food stand chicken on a hot Caerulean day. Together, we mourn with those they left behind...”

It was hard for Claudia to see from so far away, but she could have sworn he gripped the edges of the podium so much tighter as he finished his sentence. The more she looked at him, the more she was convinced. He had lost someone in the explosion.

“Oh, Atticus...” she whispered to herself.



## Chapter Forty Seven

### The Funeral of a Good Man

The dead grass in between the headstones shivered every now and then in the frigid wind.

This was the outskirts of Caeruleus City, one of the many graveyards that surrounded the sprawling urban complex. Tradition called for the dead to never be buried inside of the city. And thus this tradition created a city for itself, with citizens of the dead.

The Aurelius family's plot of land was nearly full, stuffed with graves and mausoleums.

It probably wouldn't get much fuller, though, as Serena and her father were the only two members of the lineage left. Even then, Serena could still marry into a different family and be buried with them.

The crowd for Quintus Aurelius' funeral was large, even though it was private. Quintus always had many friends.

Atticus knew almost everyone there, a testament to how much Quintus' life had been a part of his own.

There were the classmates, teachers, coworkers, distant relatives, and a handful of former Senators in attendance.

Flavius, Serena, and Atticus, as the father, sister, and best friend respectively of the deceased were sitting together in the front row. They were the three who knew Quintus the best in life.

Collectively, they all looked terrible. Due to malnourishment, sleep deprivation, and a deep seated sorrow in their hearts, they had been reduced to long shadows of what they once were.



The official ceremony hadn't started yet, and many people were still milling about, talking to each other quietly. Many went up to those three sitting in the front row, and offered their condolences. They would always get a respectful reply in return, but there wasn't much strength behind their words.

The urn with Quintus' ashes was on a table in front of the rows of chairs. It was a simple, ceramic thing. It used to be tradition for the Aurelius family to plate the containers of their remains with gold leaf, but after several embarrassing break-ins the practicing was discontinued in favor of something more modest. Personally, Atticus liked it this way better. It was more fitting for Quintus.

Flavius and Serena had decided that they would open the ceremony with a eulogy by a priest from the Cult of V. Like most of the people in Caeruleus, they had never prayed to the old gods, even though they believed in them. Quintus always had a particular *pietas* about them, though.

It was the arrival of the priest that brought Atticus' attention to the present. From the corner of his eye, he noticed the figure in red satin robes. Along with the two dozen worshipers in the procession behind him.

Atticus turned, and blinked twice, taken aback.

"Magister Tonas?" he asked, as he recognized the man.

The old teacher smiled. "Ah, *salvé*, Atticus. I would say you're looking good, but..."

"You're in the cult of V?"

"A high priest, in fact. I grew up in their care when I was a kid," he explained, before turning to Mr. Aurelius. "I'm sorry for being so intrusive, but many of the other Brothers wanted to pay their respects. Would it be alright if they stayed? I assure you they will stay near the back and out of everyone's way."





Flavius glanced apathetically to the group of men in red cloaks. “Alright. I don’t think Quintus would have had the heart to turn them away.”

“Thank you,” said Tonas graciously.

And so the ceremony began, as all the other attendees took their seats. The worshipers, true to Tonas’ word, retreated out of sight.

The funeral rites were the first things to take care of.

Tonas opened with a eulogy that few could understand, considering it was in an ancient language, but one that still sounded eloquent and dripped with reverence.

Next was Flavius, and then Serena. At first, they both also spoke in the ancient language, but ended with a plain, heartfelt tribute to their lost kin.

His father, gushing with a tragic sense of pride, told stories about the baby he held in his arms, the boy who would go up to the saddest, most lonely kids he could find and play with them to try and brighten their day, and then the man who became the Tribune of the Plebs, fighting for the people.

His sister spoke of the best brother anyone could ever have, who always protected and supported her. She wiped away tears as she described the way he helped her deal with the death of her pet rabbit, Centurion Quigely.

Atticus was fourth.

He went up to speak in front of the ashes, giving them a passing look that cemented the surreality of the situation for him.

There were no funeral rites for him to say, since he wasn’t in the immediate family. Just a few, simple words in loving memory, like he was supposed to.

It had taken him ten hours, fifteen discarded pages of paper, and two and a half pens last night to come up with a four point outline with a footnote.

“Quintus Aurelius...” he began, already trailing off.



He took a moment, trying to sort out his thoughts. Then he tried again.

“Quintus wasn’t my roommate at the academy at first. Originally, it was this guy named Cincinnatus who was really big and had really smelly feet. But that doesn’t really matter, because me and Quintus were already friends and he said he could be my roommate, and I thought that was great, because he’s great, and I didn’t want my room to smell like feet all the time, and also he was my only friend. But anyway, after he moved he figured out I had this habit of going and walking around the city at night, because that’s something I do, and he got really worried about me because I was starting to do really bad in my classes because of it. And about the same time we were covering this poetry unit in our basic literature class, and there’s this one poem, you all probably know it, the one with *carpe diem* in it and the poet was trying to get laid. Well, he told me he’d help me seize the days, and get all my school work done, and that I should work to seize the nights too, and do something good while I’m out walking, or sometimes choose to stay in and study instead. So I started doing that and it was actually really helpful, and I think that he really helped me make something good out of my life and he was the best friend I ever had. I know he made a big difference in a lot of people’s lives. And, well, it broke my heart when he died, and when I saw him lying there. And I’m sorry if I’ve become a little incoherent...it’s just...” he ended feebly. He covered his quivering lip with a clenched fist.

He looked down in shame, away from the mourners watching him. He had hardly done Quintus justice. That must have been the worst speech he had ever made. But he had nothing left to offer, so he sulked back to his seat in defeat.

Other people spoke later, but he was no longer listening. That is, until Magister Tonas went up for the second time.



He scratched the back of his head apologetically, now that his hood was down. “Earlier, I spoke as a priest at a funeral. But, for a moment, I’d like to speak as Quintus’ teacher.

“Which reminds me. Atticus, front and center,” he said as he reached into the sleeve of his cloak and withdrew a folded bundle of stapled papers.

Atticus looked at him with incomprehension.

Tonas rolled his eyes. “In your own time then.”

Suddenly occupying the role of a scolded student, Atticus timidly complied.

When he was close, Tonas held out the papers to him. It slowly dawned on him that its words were written in his handwriting.

“Sorry I didn’t return this to you sooner. You left it on your desk after I handed it back, so I was holding on to it.”

As Atticus took the papers, and looked them over, he realized it was his essay on stoic philosophy, the one he got the grade for just before his assessment.

The old score of sixty out of seventy had been scratched out, and replaced with a perfect seventy out of seventy.

“Your argument about how altruism could be interpreted as a key virtue in stoic philosophy, even as the most important result of practicing it, was somewhat unorthodox, not bad, but simply lacking in support from stoic canon. I did, however, gain a new appreciation of it when I noticed Quintus’ name on the list of the dead from the explosion.

“The first time I met young Mr. Aurelius was during the freshman orientation, when I was handing out syllabi. He asked for two, one for himself, and one for young Mr. Permisc since he was occupied with a particularly aggravating dormitory advisor.

“It was a meeting that caught me by surprise. To come across the host for the god Sol at freshman orientation, now, that was a treat.”



Atticus, who had been glancing between his essay and Tonas, raised his hand for a question.

“Yes, Mr. Permisc.”

“What?”

“Quintus was the host of the god Sol. Why else do you think all those idiots came?” he replied, motioning to the cloaked worshipers.

“Yeah, I know he was trying to follow the path of Sol, but how do you know he succeeded?”

Tonas smiled knowingly at Atticus. “A host can always recognize another host. Most don’t realize they are one though until about midway through life. It’s around year thirty that the memories of the old hosts start leaking through.”

Most of the people behind them were thoroughly confused, but Serena and her father were listening with attentive ears, since they were familiar with Quintus’ spiritual goals.

“How did you define Stoicism in your paper, Mr. Permisc?”

Atticus scanned through and found it in the second paragraph. “The school of thought is founded on the principle that virtue, the most important aspect of human life, is based on knowledge of universal truths, which are indifferent to pleasure or pain...”

“Wrong!” Tonas exclaimed. “It’s all wrong, that isn’t Stoicism at all. It’s stupid. Stupid, rubbish, junk, moldy, ammonia tainted vulgarities, that’s what it is!”

Atticus looked down on the paper, confused. “You gave me a perfect score, Magister.”

“Well that’s too bad. Because as of now, I am changing it. The whole Veritas damned school of thought,” Magister Tonas fumed out loud. “In fact, give me back that paper, I should make a correction to the grade.”

Atticus took a defensive step back, holding it against his chest.



Tonas frowned, dropping the request, and looked back to everyone sitting down. “Did you know that Antony Purpura considers himself to be a stoic?”

There was a shocked moment among those watching the exchange for the audacity to mention that name.

“Yes, that’s right. And he explained the pillars and intricacies of the philosophy in exquisite detail for his essay. It was quite unfortunate that his universal truth turned out to be evil, destruction and control, which in turn, became his virtue.

“And know what? Antony Purpura was the worst Skeptic-dammed Stoic in the whole Epicurean dammed world! Nothing more than a poorly disguised psychopath! But do you know who was a good stoic, no, the best Stoic I have ever had the pleasure of meeting?”

Atticus shook his head at the question, knowing his teacher was going to lecture him regardless of what he said.

“*Quintus Aurelius!* Now there was a stoic! Mr. Permisc’s kind of stoic. One who’s universal truth was kindness and love. Quintus Aurelius rarely acted on his own hate, or his own love, or his own emotions, and that was why he was unspeakably strong. Suffering or pleasure was irrelevant, all according to that old stoic doctrine. Altruism was the most natural thing in the world, and therefore it was good for him, happiness for him.

“Mr. Permisc, that little play Quintus took you to, you think that was for his benefit? You all, out there, think about every time Quintus Aurelius sent you a friendly smile, a kind word, a joke, put on a mask or suit of armor for your welfare. For all those times he stood up for those who didn’t have the power to stand up for themselves, do you think that was for his own benefit?”

There was no wind or words as the universe listened in stunned silence to the ramblings of the old philosopher.



“Do you all feel loved?” asked Tonas with all the authority of an investigator interrogating a delinquent child. “Because you were.”

The attendees looked to each other, wondering if they should accept his declaration as truth, or ask that he leave. But the issue was settled as a nostalgic smile appeared on some of their faces.

Atticus' grip around his essay tightened, and he went back to his seat, clutching it like it was his only tether to reality.

As for Tonas, he put his hood back up and marched off to the rest of his cloaked brethren.

“You would do well to get some rest, Atticus,” he said as he passed by.

That was the last of the rites and remembering words for the funeral.

Everyone just sat in front of those cremated remains for a while, thinking philosophical thoughts as the sun moved onwards in the sky.

Eventually, Quintus' urn was placed in the mausoleum, which was then securely locked shut. The people who came to pay their respects went their own ways, for the most part.

Flavius lead the procession back to his home, where food with a melancholy flavor was waiting for them. The cult of V went back to wherever they came from, with Tonas, specifically, going to find someplace that sold large quantities of alcohol.

But Atticus and Serena stayed a little longer, staring at the granite wall of the mausoleum next to each other.

“You know, I always felt that Quintus was better at helping people than I was,” said Serena.

“You're a Blue Cap; you help people all the time.”

“Yeah, I am. But I could never help you much, now could I?”

Atticus didn't say anything.



“And you know what else? I don’t think he would have been there, in that explosion, if he hadn’t always tried to...if he hadn’t always tried protecting everyone...tried protecting you...”

Atticus didn’t say anything to that either.

Serena looked to him, choking up with emotion. “I’m about to say something really mean to you.”

“Go ahead,” he told her.

“Screw you,” she said. “Just screw you. And screw all the reasons why Quintus stuck with you.”

After saying her piece, she left, crossing her arms bitterly as she rejoined the others.

Now, it was just Atticus and the stone wall. He laid his hand flat against the cold granite.

“Sorry about that,” he said quietly. “I didn’t mean to make her upset. And sorry about my eulogy, earlier. I think I used up all my false bravado and confidence for my speech in front of the Senate Building...”

“I just thought I’d say thank you, while I’m here.” He closed his eyes. “It’s funny. I got so sad sometimes, thinking I was so alone. But then I’d remind myself...I’ve got you for a friend. So thank you for that. And everything else.”

He curled his fingers against the wall as he let his hand slip off and fall to his side. “...hail, and farewell.”



## Chapter Forty Eight

### Ambitions of the Dead

Crassus and Felicia were in the secret lot where the Anarchists met, wondering what they were going to do. They both leaned up against the back wall, watching the handful of people who were there, exercising, preparing, cleaning weapons, or practicing their fighting.

“We have to act soon,” Felicia said, “while the iron is still hot.”

“For certain,” replied Crassus. “The guys who planted the bomb in the Senate Room probably have some plan to take over the government. If we don’t move before they do, we’ll have lost our chance.”

She looked to her brother. “I’m going to assassinate the Censor.”

“Seriously?” he asked, raising an eyebrow.

“He’s got all the power, we get rid of him; there won’t be any civilian leadership left.”

“But that still leaves the military tribunes. We need to find a way to take control of the Senate Building, that’s the nerve center of the entire government. If we got that, we’ve got the country. And besides, trying a stunt like that will probably get you killed, even if you succeed. There’s no need to risk yourself like that.”

“It’s better to risk the entire Burning Fasces?”

He sighed. “I’d prefer not to see you dead. But if I were dead too, I don’t think I’d mind as much.”

“That’s very selfish of you.”





They both stayed quiet for a bit.

And during that time, Claudia and Virginia entered the lot. The two siblings were so caught up in their pondering and planning, that they didn't notice the veiled animosity between the two members of their group.

They didn't hear the exchange of threats just before the two entered. And they didn't hear the heated agreement they made, were they each promised not to tell the other's secret in exchange for the other's silence.

So Crassus and Felicia remained unaware that Virginia carried out the attack on the Senate Building, and that Claudia was the Paphonian of the Censor.

Instead, they were consumed with thoughts about the future, and the destruction of oppression.

Felicia took a deep breath. "I'm going to kill the Censor, the Tribunes too if I can. The explosion left a gaping hole on the roof; I'll take some rope with me and rappel down from there. Please don't try and stop me."

"Oh, I won't stop you," Crassus said. "I believe in freedom. The same freedom to make your own choices that Traj believed. It was his ambition to give that freedom to everyone."

"Do you want to avenge him?"

"Of course. He was like our brother."

"Then we can start with the death of Censor Atticus Permisc," said Felicia, also unaware that Claudia had heard her, not seeing the panicked, pale face of her comrade.

Crassus nodded. "Just do me one favor...try not to die while you're at it."



## Chapter Forty Nine

### An Appointment Long Postponed

Ever since the passing of leadership, the Censor's office had become a smaller place. Stacks of important papers lay haphazardly across the three desks, cluttering up the room.

There were elections to organize, order to maintain, appointments for interim tribunes to be made, and an entire government to run. But while the country went ahead full speed on its affairs outside of that office, with Captain Ilius, for example, investigating the nature of the explosion in the Senate Room, even going so far as to commission a special forensic team from Caerulean Scientific Society, things progressed much slower inside of it. Atticus had had some trouble getting his work done lately.

When he returned to his office from Quintus' funeral, Atticus' mind was completely detached from his responsibilities. It had been raining during his journey, but he didn't bother to take his wet suit off.

Clemens and Flora were still there, even though it was late. They stood over some report or another, reading it together. There was some tacit, reassuring affection between them, which only served to reaffirm for Atticus that there was something deeply wrong with the world that night. As did the dead potted plant behind Clemens' desk.

He cleared his throat, and the secretaries turned to him.

"You two are dismissed for tonight," he said.

"But Censor Permisc..." Flora began.

"Go on," Atticus insisted. "You've both done enough for today."



Reluctantly, they did as they were directed to, and abandoned their paper engulfed posts.

Once they had closed the doors and were out of sight, Atticus went deeper into the office. He sat down on the floor in the farthest corner of the room, behind his desk.

He figured he would stay there for a while.

The funeral had left him drained. And he wondered if he deserved the growing hatred towards himself in the pit of his stomach.

The more he cynically pondered it, the more he believed he had failed Quintus, Caeruleus, and everyone else.

The Senate had chosen him because he was weak, and easy to control. He hadn't earned his position. But now there was no one left to control him, and nobody left to prop him up either. And then, even before he became the Censor, he had done nothing to earn the love he desperately wanted from Quintus, or anyone else he cared for. Perhaps he had done nothing to earn Quintus' friendship either.

He sighed and fixed his eyes on the toe of his boot.

He didn't look up when he heard the door to the office gently open. He didn't look up when the padding of the intruder's feet stopped right in front of him.

He only looked up when he heard the click of a gun being cocked.

He could see straight down the barrel of the revolver, and he could see the red anarchy tattoo on the woman's wrist.

Felicia stood over the Censor, her finger on the trigger of the gun to his head. She waited for him to acknowledge her threat. But he didn't. He didn't cry, or shout, or beg. He just blinked and slowly looked back down, as if he was content with his fate.

So she pulled the trigger.

The hammer snapped down impotently. Frantically, she recoiled the gun and tried again. And again. And again. It was



only after the fifth try that it seemed she began to consider that there were no bullets in the chambers.

Suddenly, she dropped the gun.

Atticus raised his gaze up in confusion to see his would-be-assassin with her hands up, and eyes alight with fury.

“Step away from the Censor,” said Captain Ilius frigidly. He stood in the doorway, pointing his pistol at her. Claudia was at his side.

She wore her white stola, as if she had dressed up for the occasion, but it was soaked from the rain and there were mud stains on it from where she had fallen in her haste to get there. There was a glint of metal in her closed fist. When she opened it, almost apologetically, she revealed the bullets intended for Atticus' head.

“Claudia...” he whispered in astonishment as he quickly recognized the girl he traveled with on the Caerulean plains.

“You traitor!” Felicia snarled. “Coward!”

“I’m sorry,” Claudia said to her as she was handcuffed by Ilius and placed under arrest. She then addressed the Captain. “Promise me she won’t be harmed.”

He raised his eyebrows. “I appreciate your help on this matter, but the wellbeing of criminals isn’t my problem.”

Claudia turned to Atticus. “Promise me she won’t be harmed,” she repeated.

“Captain Ilius, you will take this woman to be detained at camp invigilus, and you will ensure her personal safety until she arrives there,” Atticus said, not moving from his spot in the corner. “At which time the military police will be transferred the responsibility. If any harm should befall her, I will personally remove you from your position.”

“But, Sir-”

“You have your orders, Captain.”



With a grunt of disapproval, Ilius grabbed Felicia by the shoulder and led her out as she continued to glare daggers at Claudia.

“I won’t forget you’re part in this,” said Felicia venomously as she passed her.

“I wouldn’t expect you to,” replied Claudia.

When they were gone, she approached Atticus.

They stared openly at each other, waiting for a move to be made.

“You just saved my life,” said Atticus, finally.

“Yeah.”

“...how did you know she was going to try to kill me?”

“Because I’m an Anarchist in the Burning Fasces, just like her,” she told him honestly.

“Oh. Well, thank you, I suppose.” He gave her a small smile.

For the first time since she had arrived, Claudia began to show nervousness. She pocketed the bullets she had been holding, and diverted her gaze away from him.

“I...um...I had been searching for you, ever since I left Sylvania. There was something really important I wanted to talk with you about,” she said, not mentioning how she looked through every face in every crowd, and checked every shadow that crossed hers in the desperate hope she would find him.

“I’m listening.”

“There’s this story. The story of the artist Pygmalion who fell in love with a statue which was brought to life. It’s a true one, you know. Because in the end he got his wish and his wife. C-created a living, breathing human with nothing but magic, imagination, and ivory...I never told that story, as a magician. But apparently, some magicians can use that story to make a person...Crazy, huh?

“I didn’t know at first,” she continued. “I thought I just had amnesia when I woke up in that abandoned building. But



eventually I found out what I was, and I went to the Sylvanians to see who my creator was. I came to tell you what I discovered about myself at the end.

She swallowed. “You created me. With that story. Ever since the Sylvanian elders performed the spell to reveal who made me, I’ve been gaining some memories, your memories, in the moments just before you told the story. You sure felt sad and lonely, then proud, then sad and lonely again. You were so caught up in the story that you hadn’t noticed my form beginning to take shape in one of the empty buildings nearby. But I was there, just coming into the world...”

When Claudia finished her explanation and revelation, she waited silently for Atticus' response.

It took him some time to process and understand it all.

“Oh,” he said in realization after a while. “Oh...”

This new truth only added to the paradigm he had been building. He had failed Claudia too. The one person he thought he touched in the same positive way they had touched him. He had left her out on the streets, all alone, just because of his carelessness in the way he used magic.

He closed his eyes tight, fighting back tears he didn’t want to spill in front of her. “I’m sorry. I didn’t know. I abandoned you...”

Claudia was taken aback. She didn’t know what she was expecting, but this wasn’t it.

“Don’t apologize,” she said. “I wouldn’t have had it any other way. It wasn’t an easy journey, but, in the end, I wouldn’t have taken back a single moment. Especially the moments when I was with you. Please don’t ever apologize for my existence.”

She sat down in front of him, and leaned in close. “And besides, I forgave you the moment you took my hand,” she said as she reached forward, and held the hand he had tried to use to wipe away his tears.



“But I was no use to you...or Quintus...or Caeruleus...or...”

His words soon lost their coherency, and devolved into gibberish. He looked so tired, beaten and defeated.

Claudia scooted to his side so that they were both in that tiny, dark corner of the office together, and she embraced him like she knew all his weakness as well as his strength.

He rested his head against her shoulder, feeling the dampness of her hair, and he sobbed.



## Chapter Fifty

### The Victor's almost Triumph

**A**fter abandoning his home, there was only one logical place for Antony to hide: the historical center. The former meeting place for the Decemvirate Council.

The Council was nothing short of destroyed at this point, as according to his plan.

Several died in the explosion in the Senate Building, a few required more exotic and creative means of disposal. Antony and Marcus had been very thorough; the Decemvirate Council had its ranks filled with exceptionally powerful people and it had been hard work to ensure that those powers were neutralized.

Effectively, there was no longer a Decemvirate Council. The organization which had propped up the Monarchy and led Caeruleus throughout the greatest eras of power in the world had been obliterated, by one of its most ambitious members no less.

Antony didn't not like the location. He found the architecture and dark lavender tones to his liking, but he missed his old office more. As for Virginia, she found it a tad too dark and foreboding in some places, and too much like a dry and impersonal museum in others. But it was also an incredibly convenient hideout ever since all the non-essential public buildings were closed.

Antony, Virginia, and Marcus were all there at the moment, in the main council room. With Antony smiling a giddy smile as he sat on the edge of the ancient wooden table, feeling the exuberating and intoxicating feel of victory that had been growing inside his chest.





“Well done all!” Antony said slowly, glowing with pride. He looked from Virginia to Marcus and back to Virginia, still holding that giddy smile, before reaching behind himself and grabbing the newspaper he had left there. “We made the front page!” he exclaimed. “For the fourth day in a row!”

“And look!” he continued, flipping through the pages of the newspaper flippantly. “It seems we made the second page as well! And the third one, and the fourth, and the fifth, and the sixth and...” he squinted at a tiny section in the bottom corner.

“*Water borne illness kills thirty two in Ophius...*” he mumbled to himself. “Damn that Ophius!” he declared, throwing the paper up into the air. He clapped in congratulations until the pages of the discarded newspaper settled on the ground and table.

“We have Atticus and his silly government running scared. The Senate is gone and the momentum we’ve won won’t easily dissipate. It won’t be long now, just let the world watch! Caeruleus will surpass the former glory of the kings! The new shall be in and the old shall be out!” Antony exclaimed grandiosely.

“And thank you, both of you, for your loyalty throughout. I doubt I would have gone very far without you two. We are our own little Triumvirate, aren’t we? As long as we stand together, the world will be ours!”

“Indeed,” said Marcus as he cleaned his monocle. “But we shouldn’t award ourselves too much praise before the deed is completely done. We must concentrate on our next step.”

“Of course, of course, Marcus. Still work to be done. Virginia, we will need you with the Anarchists for just a tad bit longer, but fortunately, their end is nigh and you won’t have to deal with them much longer.”

Virginia, who was holding her hands together behind her back, dug her nails into her palm in order to smile. “I look forward to that day,” she said.

“They are still planning an imminent attack, correct?”



“Yes. They would never miss such an opportunity.”

“Excellent!” he exclaimed before turning to Marcus. “And that just leaves the legitimacy of the Censor’s reign, and the Military Tribunes to deal with.”

“The matter of the Tribunes is as simple as a few well-placed bullets,” Marcus said confidently. “But as far as legitimacy...”

Antony held up his index finger. “I may have an idea. Among the Praetorian Guards here with us are several whose loyalties aren’t known to the government. Send one to talk to the others. I’m sure many of them still have bitterness over the thrashing they received at the hands of the Anarchists at that factory. Have him tell them it was the Anarchists responsible for the explosion, that they wanted to blame you and the Praetorian Guard. Perhaps even tell them Censor Permisc supports this theory, and wouldn’t mind if something was done about it. Something with a shocking amount of violence involved.”

Marcus grinned. “Oh, that sounds positively wicked. I love it. And I think I know just the man for the job.”

Antony looked fondly to his two lieutenants. “I trust you, Marcus. And I trust you too, Virginia. I hope that trust is in good hands.” He jumped up from his sitting place on the table, and kissed Virginia.

She tried to reflect the same pride and happiness in his eyes in hers. She wasn’t sure if she succeeded.

If she hadn’t, Antony didn’t seem to notice when he pulled away still with that happiness.

When they left the room, Virginia waited until they were out of sight before she allowed the pleasant mask she had been wearing to collapse.

She sighed and leaned up against the wall for support. She didn’t want Antony to see her this way; he wouldn’t be pleased to see the toll that the destruction of the Senate had taken on her.



That the blood spilled on the floor and the bodies thrown askew had made her stomach sick with the knowledge she was responsible.

Claudia's body had been there too. But after seeing so much death, so much emptiness, Virginia couldn't bring herself to kill her, even if their brief friendship had been long lost. Antony probably wouldn't have approved of that mercy, though.

"Are you Virginia?" asked a monotone voice beside her.

She whirled around, and came face to face with a uniformed Praetorian Guard captain. He was an unnaturally pale and thin man, with distant looking grey eyes. To Virginia, he looked like a walking corpse.

"Yes...who's asking?"

The man smiled, revealing two rows of crooked and rotting teeth. "Ahhh, what a pleasure. I only wanted to ask you a few questions, that's all."

"Like what?"

"How did it feel?"

"I'm sorry... I'm not sure what you're talking about."

"The spell! The spell of death! How did it feel as you ripped apart the senate?" he asked, grinning eagerly as he stepped closer.

Virginia jumped back in fright. "I-I..." she stammered.

"Come on, tell me! You performed the greatest feat of destructive magic inside Caeruleus in a thousand years, don't be shy."

Virginia felt sweat gathering on her hands. "I-I have to go," she said as she turned and ran away from him, but he followed.

"How did it feel as you lorded over their bodies and their blood?! Did it feel good? Did it feel powerful?" he asked as he bounded after her. "Don't be remorseful child, you asked for death, didn't you? And he came! Nothing but what you ordered!"



She dodged into the nearest broom closet and slammed the door behind her. Her breath was heavy as she pressed her back against the door, shame and terror burning through her body.

“Oh, no need to be that way, little one,” came the Praetorians muffled voice. “I only asked a simple question.”

Virginia didn’t move, and she didn’t answer. She didn’t dare.

And the guard didn’t leave until Marcus and Antony found him, and gave him his special task: to irrevocably tarnish the regime of Atticus Permisc in the eyes of the country.



## Chapter Fifty One

### Red Runs Red

The troupe of Praetorian Guards marched down the Plebian District Road. There were several dozen of them, with some still exiting the official trucks and cars they used to get there.

The job of the rogue Captain, as assigned to him by the former Tribune of Justice, was extremely easy. The Praetorians, who had been the butt of the public's anger, were eager to find a scapegoat to blame for their misfortune: a position ideal for the Anarchists.

The Captain and his men passed by a homeless man eating an apple before stopping suddenly in the middle of the street. Some of the residents peeked carefully out their windows to see what was going on.

He grinned wildly. "Alright boys! Fan out and bring back everyone wearing anything red! Don't be afraid to break a few bones if you have to!"

And so they went forth to all the houses on the block. The doors that were locked were broken down, those that shouted were quieted down, and those that resisted were beaten down. Anyone who so much as had a tomato sauce stain on their clothes was dragged out of their home at gunpoint.

Four of them were even Anarchists.

The homeless man who had been watching their search slowly stood up, stuffing his unfinished apple core into his pocket. He approached them cautiously.



But it wasn't until they began to line up the people they had seized that he spoke up.

"Hey! What do you all think you're doing?!"

They ignored him and aimed their weapons at the civilians. There were whimpers among them, along with tear filled requests for mercy. All of which were also ignored.

The homeless man rushed forward, trying to push their guns down. "Stop it! Stop it!" he exclaimed. "This isn't a Virtus-damned war zone! You can't just kill people like this!"

He was roughly thrown in with the others they had rounded up.

"Ready!" shouted the Captain, eyeing the Plebians kneeling before him with dreadful glee. "Aim!"

The revolvers and rifles were cocked, and the shotguns were pumped in a single ominous crackling of sound.

There were several last second shouts of despair, screams of terror, and last ditch attempts for survival. One of the Anarchists attempted to tackle their executioners.

*"Fire!"*

There was a thunderous retort from the guns, and the men, women and children they were pointed towards slumped down into a crumpled pile.

For the sake of thoroughness, the Praetorians fired another two volleys.

Bits and pieces of flesh and bone were blown sporadically down the street. Beneath the limp bodies, blood began to seep onto the cobblestone like it was trickling from a tap.

The people who hadn't been chosen for killing could only look on in horror.

When they were done, the Praetorians ordered everyone left back into their homes and some took the dead bodies away. But the rest continued on to the next block, their mission not over yet.



Only the Captain remained behind. "I'll join you in a moment," he told them, and so they left without him.

He still had his terrible smile and gleaming eyes as he walked forward, his shoes making gentle splashes in the puddles of blood.

"Come out, come out, Spero! It is simply inappropriate for a host of that stature to sulk in the shadows!" he called loudly.

After a moment, a large man with a camera in his hands stepped out from the darkness of a nearby ally.

"This *host* has a name, Mortis," the god of Hope replied through gritted teeth.

Mortis, still in his Praetorian disguise, waved his hand dismissively. "Oh what does it matter? You're just going to get a new one in a few years anyway. You younger gods are such fickle things."

"His...or rather, my name is Tros Euxin. Just so you know. And I've already called the Legion; they won't let your vile killing spree go on for much longer."

Mortis disappeared from where he stood, as if he was only a fleeting trick of the light, and reappeared mere inches away for Tros.

"Oh, I don't care what happens to those guards. Their work is just the preamble to a much greater, more delicious feast. But enough about me and my succulent meals," Mortis said, staring with unblinking eyes at Tros. "I should say that I have always been a little envious at your uncanny ability to always be in the right place at the right time."

Tros frowned. "What are you doing here?"

"Me? I was invited! That explosion in the Senate made for an excellent first course, served on a fine blue platter by the magician who extended the invitation. And the best part is that was just the beginning!"



“Whether you were invited or not is irrelevant. Leave now,” Tros demanded.

“How about you leave,” said Mortis as he took a step back, and pointed his revolver up to the reporter’s head. “Leave this earthly realm, that is!”

Tros was unfazed. “You can’t feed on the souls of hosts.”

“That’s true,” Mortis admitted, lowering the gun. “And besides, your host’s death is going to be too precious to spoil. So why don’t you just run off with your silly photographs, *Spero*, and allow me to feast in peace.”

“You won’t be able to chew through this town as easy as you think you will,” Tros told him.

“Is that what you know, or is that what you hope?” asked Mortis smugly.

Tros just turned, not dignifying the question with an answer, and began to walk away with disgust. The god of death watched him leave with the gaze of a patient vulture.

There was the sound of gunfire and sirens in the distance, but it was overshadowed by the cackling of Mortis’ mad laughter as the chaos in the city prepared more and more souls for the slaughter and, subsequently, his dinner table.





## Chapter Fifty Two

### Best Laid Plans

Not everyone in Caeruleus knew the incalculable value of a good night's sleep as much as Atticus Permisc. So when he woke up that morning, feeling refreshed under serca covers for the first time in more than a month, he allowed himself a brief bout of happiness before his mind returned to reality.

However, when he opened his eyes, the truth weighed heavily on him again.

Claudia was already awake, sitting up with her legs crossed and staring at the painting on the wall.

They had both decided late in the night, as they teetered on the edge of drifting off to the realm of dreams right on the floor, that'd it be best that they retire to the bedroom. Once they had settled themselves in that ancient bed, side by side, they rested easy.

Now, Claudia let out a light laugh as she studied the painting and the room at large.

Atticus propped himself up. "What's so funny?"

"It's all very fancy. Very pretty. "

"Well, it *is* the Senate building. It's hardly lacking in aesthetics."

"I know, but it feels weird to me, that's all."

She frowned. "I remember I felt the same way when I was in the Senate Building last time, when I was here to testify..."

"You were there?"



She nodded. “The explosion was caused Virginia, Antony’s Paphonian. She was an Anarchist too. She used her magic to destroy the Senate. I tried to stop her.”

“So that’s how that bastard did it,” said Atticus quietly. “I can’t believe you made it out of there alive! What were you even testifying?”

“What I saw and heard while I was in Antony’s captivity.”

“So you were the girl?” he said in surprise. “That must have been horrible! What did he do to you?”

“I was tied to a chair the whole time, but I made it out in one piece. He probably would have killed me if Virginia hadn’t convinced him I could help him with their plan,” she replied.

She took Atticus’ right hand into her own and leaned into his body. “We have to stand together to stop them. If we don’t they could take the whole country, or destroy it trying.”

Atticus sighed, and leaned into her as well, so that they were both held steady by the other. “There’s a lot to do.”

“I’m sure.”

“I’ll need to weed out any support they might have left in the Praetorian Guard.”

“And they were definitely going to use the Burning Fuses for something. Otherwise, why have Virginia infiltrate them?”

“Yeah, that makes sense...” Atticus agreed before descending into silence.

“You alright?” Claudia asked him after a minute.

“I dunno. After Quintus died, I didn’t think I’d ever be alright again. I’m still not sure.”

“He seemed like a very honorable man,” Claudia said. “He gave me sanctuary in his own home before I was supposed to testify.”

Atticus smiled nostalgically. “He was the best man I’d ever known. A natural born leader. But, of course, I’m the one who’s



left with in charge of the whole nation. I was never much of a leader.”

“You shouldn’t think like that. I heard you talk about peace and freedom and safety during that speech of yours. Those are the kinds of things leaders talk about. Right?”

“That was just a speech,” he told her.

“It doesn’t have to be,” she replied.

Atticus turned and looked into her eyes. He hesitated for a moment before asking: “Do you know why I tried to become the Censor?”

“Why?”

He swallowed. “It was...it was because I had a crush on Quintus. I knew he would never reciprocate my feelings, and I did it anyway so I would have the chance to work with him, and be around him. It wasn’t for anything like honor, pride in country, or even a wish to make the world a better place.” he looked back down and awaited her judgment.

“Oh...” She was confused at first, in regards to the nature of the love. She hadn’t expected Atticus to be interested in a male partner. But she forced her confusion to be brief after wondering, for a moment, if she was vulnerable to similar inclinations, and so she focused on the more pertinent issue. “You did all that because of a crush you had?”

“Yeah. I guess it was pretty childish of me.”

Claudia smiled. “Don’t worry. I’m pretty childish too.” She reached under her pillow and retrieved her yoyo, which she had stored there for the night. She used her left hand to flick it up and down over the edge of the bed. “But now we’ve got to try and be better than that. Not just because of everyone counting on us, but for our own sakes.”

There was something about what she said that stirred a sense of importance inside Atticus. He could no longer be the incompetent, unfocused and selfish child he had lived as up until



then. His responsibilities were too great to be ignored any longer. He had to try to fulfill them, if not for his own sake, then for the sake of Caeruleus, Claudia, and the memory of Quintus. He needed to think about the consequences of his actions for once in his life, and at least try to follow what he knew as truth and virtue, instead of what was easy as he was accustomed to.

“You’re right,” said Atticus. “I’ll do my best,” he promised.

“I’ll do my best too,” said Claudia. “This isn’t just about you or me anymore. It’s a lot bigger.”

“We’d better get started,” Atticus replied.

He was reluctant to move from his spot, though, as he felt the warmth of Claudia’s body from where they touched. It wasn’t something he was eager to cast off.

He wanted to kiss her first, but he was instinctively frightened by the prospect. By sheer closeness of their current situation, he was able to overcome what trepidation he had, and give her the gesture of affection.

She kissed him back with equal passion. Neither of them wanted to let go of the precious moment, but as the old Caerulean adage goes: time heals all wounds and destroys all things. Eventually, they were forced by the time and reality of their existence to leave that bed and the Censor’s room.

Flora and Clemens were just arriving for their shifts. At first, there was something weary about their movements, but they perked up instantly when they noticed Atticus and the woman by his side.

“Morning Censor Permisc...” said Clemens. “...had a good night, I take it?”

Atticus smiled. “As a matter of fact, I slept exceedingly well. But no time for chit chat today, there’s much work to be done.”

He cleared his throat and looked to Flora. “Report.”

“Sir?” asked Flora, unsure of what he wanted.



“Give me a report. Tell me the current issues. I want to make sure I’m not forgetting anything.”

“Well, there are the terrorists who must be dealt with. Four interim Tribunes still need to be appointed. The People’s Department is currently reporting over one thousand individual concerns repeatedly brought up by citizens, many concerning public safety, the Tribune of Justice, the Praetorian Guards and upcoming elections. Also, of course, there are the elections themselves. The last count had seven hundred and ninety eight candidates for Senate countrywide. The People’s Department and the Department of Revenue say they are understaffed for preparing for the election. Oh, and there appears to be a cast of vultures that have gotten into the Senate Room through a tear in the tarp over the ceiling.”

Atticus nodded and sat down at his desk, Claudia followed him there.

“Alright. Flora, would you be a dear a go fetch Captain Ilius for me? We’ll need to formulate a plan for purging rogue Praetorians from the guard. Clemens, go get one of the janitors to shoot the vultures and fix the tarp. And would I be right to assume the relevant briefings for everything else is on my desk?” he asked.

“Yes, sir,” said Flora.

“Also yes, sir,” said Clemens.

“And of course, sir,” finished Flora, now having replied to each of his respective requests and questions with Clemens.

The two secretaries exchanged a smile before carrying out their prescribed duties. Their Censor was back.

Claudia hugged him from behind.

“How much longer do you think you’ll stay?” he asked.

“Not long. I’ll have to get back to the Anarchists.”

“Yeah, I figured as much.”

She frowned thoughtfully. “Hey, Atticus?”

He looked up at her.



“When this is all over...will you promise to tell me your story? I’d just, you know, like to know you better.”

He smiled. “I promise. But only if you’ll tell me yours.”

“Agreed,” said Claudia as she gently squeezed him.

Soon, she made to return to the Plebian District, and Atticus opened the first manila folder of many.



## Chapter Fifty Three

### Revocation

Claudia was checking herself in the broken mirror in her home just before she planned to leave and see the other Anarchists. She fixed her bandanna so that it was perfectly straight and tightened the knot in the back.

Once she felt ready, she opened her front door but instantly stopped in surprise.

Crassus stood there with his hand raised, just about to knock. “Ah, Claudia,” he said, putting his hand down. “We’ve got a lot to discuss.”

“I was just about to go find you...um, come in.”

Crassus had a serious look about him, and even as he came in he made no excessive movement. It was all business. Gone was the carefree attitude and the sometimes morbid playfulness he had when she first met him.

She wondered if that was partly her fault. He had lost his best friend, and now his sister. The latter loss she was responsible for and even though she didn’t regret her actions, she couldn’t help but pity him.

“First things first,” he began. “Did you about hear what happened last night?”

Claudia shifted her gaze away from him. “Wasn’t that when Felicia was going to try and assassinate the Censor?”

“Yeah. Felicia got captured, just like I thought she would. I guess it’s a step up from being dead. It’ll be a while before we see her again. But, unfortunately, that’s not what I’m talking about. No, I’m talking about the massacre.”



He said the word in passing, so casually, that she could have sworn he'd misheard it. "The what?"

"The massacre," he repeated. "The Praetorian Guard came into the Plebian District and shot everyone they could get their hands on wearing the color red. Seventy two people died, eleven of them our own. I'm sure you know what this means."

"No..."

"Massive retaliation," he said simply. "Preparations are already underway for an assault on the Senate Building. There are people organizing massive protests there too. The Guards and Soldiers will be occupied with them at the front entrance. It'll be our best opportunity to strike. That's when we kill that bastard Censor and his crony Ilius."

Claudia eyes grew wide and her heart skipped a beat. "But what about the Praetorians?" she asked quickly.

"The legion arrested most of them once their rampage was over. But we managed to capture one. He told us his orders came straight from Atticus Permisc. We proceeded to beat the crap out of him and he's now hanging by his underwear on the flagpole by the Praetorian Guard headquarters. What's left of him, anyway. Oh, and as a word of advice, don't ask how we got him there."

"I see..." She swallowed. "So, um, what's our plan of action?"

"We hit them with everything we've got. Especially you. They might have numbers, but we have a magician," he said proudly. "We'll use your magic to break through their lines, and then we comb the building for our targets. When we find them, we bring them in front of the people protesting, we read off their crimes, and we execute them."

Claudia was panicking internally. She wasn't ready for this, not so soon.

"Are you sure we couldn't wait, just a day...or two..."





“No. This is our best shot! True anarchy could finally find a home in Caeruleus, we can’t wait a moment longer.”

“But the massacre just happened last night. How do you expect to have everything ready by tomorrow?”

“We’ve been getting ready ever since the explosion in the Senate Building, and I’ve got guys preparing the weapons and trucks we stole from the Praetorians right now. Why are you being so skittish? This is everything we’ve ever hoped for!” He rapped his knuckles on the table in impatience. “Not to mention this Censor just had innocent people slaughtered in the streets!”

“I know. I know,” said Claudia.

Crassus frowned. “If it weren’t for you, we wouldn’t even have the resources to pull this off. You know that, right? What’s all this about? Is that stuff about your creator still messing with your head?”

“I-I just...”

“Look at me,” Crassus demanded. “Are you afraid?”

Claudia was taken aback by his forcefulness.

“Are you afraid?” he repeated. His eyes bore into her like sharpened stakes, and by their sheer intensity she found that she couldn’t bring herself to lie. And neither could she tell the truth because of the shame it would bring her.

So she just stood there, mouth partially agape, not knowing what to say.

She was afraid. Not for herself, but for Atticus, and the Anarchists too. If either he were killed or them destroyed, she would never forgive herself.

Crassus couldn’t read the reasons behind her fear; he could only recognize its existence. But that was enough for him to make his decision.

He sighed and reached forward. She flinched back, but he pressed on, and snatched her bandanna from off her head.



“You’re relieved of duty,” he said as he crumpled the red fabric in his fist. “We can take care of this, for now. Come back when you’re straight in the head.”

He left the way he came in, but more frustrated than before.

Claudia was left standing there in shock, slowly feeling more and more naked without her bandanna.

Once she regained control over herself, she slammed her fists down on the wooden table. “Dammit!” she shouted.

She blew it.

She could have been able to do something if she went along with it. She should have said something, anything to convince him of her bravery. She would have stopped them, somehow. But now...

“Dammit! Dammit! Dammit!”

Yet, after a while, her anger at herself faded to conviction.

Was she an Anarchist? Truly?

Maybe she wasn’t. Regardless of her old colors, she couldn’t define herself as that now.

But she could believe in the same freedom as the Anarchists did and not be one. She could fight, and still not be a warrior. Even more than that, she could fight for peace even as the world tried to tear itself apart around her.

She whirled around and faced that dirty, cracked mirror. She revised her plan as she traced a word in the dust on its surface.

Now that she knew Crassus’ plan, she and Atticus could create an effective counter strategy. The only thing left to do was find Virginia and figure out what she and Antony were going to do.

If it came down to it, she’d fight her again. This time she wasn’t going to hold back, and she’d use the best weapon in her arsenal: magic.

She pressed her hand flat the glass and light poured into its cracks. When it abated the mirror was whole again, as good as the day it was made.



Perhaps she should have thanked Crassus. Because suddenly, for the first time in her life, she knew who she was and she knew her purpose.

She would bring peace to Caeruleus and save her friends, both those in the halls of government and those wearing the colors of anarchy in the streets, or die trying.



## Chapter Fifty Four

### The Kings of Caeruleus

The skies were dark and cloudy over the Senate Building, like dirty concrete, and oddly enough, the ground was blue and clean where Atticus was standing. It was almost as if the world had been torn apart and put back together upside down.

He was on the steps of the front entrance, overlooking the plaza. That morning, not long after Claudia had left, he had heard about the atrocities during the night.

It was something that made him sick to his stomach. Perhaps if he had acted sooner, he could have prevented it...

He sighed, and sat down on the steps. He was flanked on either side by legionnaire guards, under orders from Ilius to deter further assassination attempts. He didn't pay them any attention. Instead, he stared at the bright red paint splattered on the wall on the other side of the plaza

It made him think back to an older time. An even worse time.

In the years of the monarchy, the king had created the position of the Censor, just like Tonas had told him about before he was stuck with the job. He was designed to be the man who dictated the morals of the country. In the times of old, it was a position reserved for the king's most trusted advisor.

The word *king* was a dirty word in the minds of the Caerulean people and its history was a dark one. The oppression and fear today was nothing compared to the final days of the kingdom.



It was a police state, where the Praetorian Guard was known for kidnapping “rogue elements” in the dead of night, and then revealing what was left of their disfigured forms before the public as an example.

The kings themselves were rotten exemplars of humanity. The first one wasn’t so bad, but as time went on, they became increasingly worse. Each generation was more cruel, more arrogant, and more insane than the last. That is, with the exception of the ninth, King Octavius Sanguinis The Happy, who was too consumed by exotic drugs, women, and surrealist poetry to do much harm to anyone. But the end of the lineage was the very worst: King Superbus.

It was under him that the Senate Building was finished, although back then it was simply called the Sapphire Palace. Nine hundred and seven workers had died in the last five years of construction alone, the majority from exhaustion and malnourishment.

The cost of the Palace, along with the war against the mighty city-state of Surmona Arx, dried up the State coffers. There was no longer money to pay for the grain subsidies that sustained the elaborate patron-client system which kept the king at the top. When the Legion suffered a crippling defeat in their military campaign, the public grew fed up, and not even the iron grip of Praetorian Guard was enough to quell the growing unrest.

Eventually, king was forced to create the Caerulean Senate to make the people feel as though their voice was heard. The group of one hundred Senators from around the country was made of rich and noble men, all who had grown dissatisfied with the King’s monopoly of power.

In another attempt to divert attention away from his failures, Superbus attacked the cult of V for attempting to undermine his reign. Of course, it wasn’t called a cult back then. It was a legitimate religious order. But the King’s propaganda was so



thorough, so elaborate, that the name changed in the public's mind.

The followers of the five immortals never managed to change it back.

But together, the followers of V and the Senate were able to win over the public's support, and they led massive protests in front of the Sapphire Palace, even after Superbus ordered both groups disbanded.

The assembled people were peaceful, at first. And then it happened.

It was just one person. That was it.

A frightened Praetorian Guard thrust his spear into the crowd, killing a man. He happened to be a pretty popular guy.

That was the start of the revolution.

It lasted exactly five days.

On the fifth night, the barricaded door to the King's bedchambers was broken down, and he was dragged out from underneath his bed and killed. Supposedly, it was the goddess Virtus herself who led the charge, and Superbus' last words in the face of divine wrath were either "And thus tyranny always falls to virtue," in a final moment of clarity, or, by other accounts, "Get your foot off my neck!"

The very next day the Republic was born. The king's remains were destroyed and the ashes hidden. The Senate created a new motto for Caeruleus. SPQC: the Senate and the Cerulean People. It was a promise.

Atticus sighed. The wind picked up and blew his hair one way, then another. He read the graffiti one more time.

**SIC SEMPER TYRANNIS**

It was in the ancient language, but neither Atticus nor anyone else in Caeruleus needed it translated to know what it meant.

It was a rallying cry against him.



And worse still, it compared him to those wicked old kings.

Rumors were spreading about what he and his government were doing. Whispers that he had ordered the attack in the Plebian District, that maybe he wouldn't relinquish control to the new senate, or even that perhaps he had been involved in the conspiracy to destroy the senate.

It was a maddening feeling to know the whole world was slowly growing to hate him.

As quietly as he had sat down, he stood back up. The plaza had been sealed off as workers scrubbed off the paint from the building, but already demonstrators were gathering on the parameter.

He would have to prepare a statement in response. It wouldn't be an easy one to write.

"Censor Permisc," said Captain Ilius from behind him, "that girl is here to see you."

Suddenly, Atticus found himself smiling. "Claudia..." he said to himself, as he made to go back inside. The thought of her instantly put something warm back in him.

He hoped she brought some good news. Anything to help him escape this horrible feeling that the threads of fate were being woven into a noose around his neck.



## Chapter Fifty Five

### A Phantasmic Warning

It was the middle of the night, and the Anarchists were finishing the preparations for their assault in the depths of The Pit. Every gun had been cleaned and loaded, and all the trucks filled with gas and strapped with scrap metal as extra armor. Red war paint sat in cans ready to be applied in the morning.

Those who had completed their midnight tasks settled in to get a bit of rest before it all went down. But Crassus, Virginia and Agatha were still talking in a little niche that overlooked the rest of the quarry.

“Just think about it, for a second,” said Crassus, looking wishfully at his comrades down below. “All the injustices that will finally be punished and undone, all the corruption that’ll be destroyed, if we can just pull this off.”

“No matter what happens, I think tomorrow will be going down in history,” said Agatha confidently.

“Me too,” said Virginia softly.

Crassus turned and looked them over. “You two should go and get some shut eye while you still can. It’ll be a long day once the sun rises.”

“Good idea,” agreed Agatha with a yawn. She began a trek down to the lower levels of the quarry, but Virginia hung back for a moment.

“Hey Crassus,” she said.

“Yeah?”

“What do you figure we’re going to do if we succeed, and well...don’t die in the process,” she asked.





He smiled. “Well the idea was that we’d keep on taking out anybody who tries to take power, or exploit other people. And we can try to get people organized, try to make a society where everybody has ownership over themselves, their work and their life. Someone’s bound to pounce on the opportunities, and we’ll have to be there to stop them. Murderers, rapists, thieves, we can take them out too. I for one have dreamt of a world without slaves for a long time. Of a world where neither Senators nor industrialists can claim us as their property. I refuse to let that dream be so ephemeral.”

“And what if everything goes to crap?”

“Have you seen the world we live in? Everything’s always been crap. All a guy can do is shovel the stuff that smells too bad into a corner.”

Virginia thought about it for a moment, then shrugged in defeat. “I guess so.”

“Don’t think about it too hard if it bothers you,” he said.

She crossed her arms and followed the same path Agatha had taken to get down. “Goodnight Crassus,” she told him.

As she left, Crassus took the shotgun he had chosen for himself and sat down on a boulder by the mouth of a cave. He checked to make sure it was loaded and then laid back, settling into his makeshift seat.

He didn’t expect any sleep. Crassus never expected much out of anything.

Even the day he had helped put together the Burning Fasces, he had never expected this moment to come, that they might actually change the world. He had always just done what was necessary. On occasion, what was necessary was a monumental feat. And he would always get it done.

But then, he always had a skewed sense of what was necessary. Standing by his friends, his family, and that foolish ideal of freedom was his definition. Life, not so much.



Everybody died, and if he died doing what was necessary, he was fine with that.

He closed his eyes, and pretended that colors his mind painted against the walls of his eyelids was his dream. It was just then that he heard a whisper.

“...crassus...”

His eyes snapped open.

“...Crassus...” whispered the voice again.

He got to his feet and pumped the shotgun slide.

“Whadayawant?”

“Crassus...” it said. This time, he realized it was coming from the cave.

Slowly, he edged into the dark cavern. “Hello?” he called out.

The repetition of his name was the only reply.

He rolled his eyes. “If you don’t speak up, I swear I’ll blast your face off.”

“I’m afraid it’s a bit late for that,” replied the voice, now behind him. It was only then that Crassus recognized it.

“Trajan?!” he exclaimed, whirling around.

And sure enough, there stood the faded, transparent body of Trajan Catulli. He looked like a reflection in gleaming spider silk. He also looked extremely wet, his clothes clinging tight against his body.

Slowly, Crassus put down the gun. “...so you really are dead.”

“Yeah, it sucks,” he replied.

“What happened?”

“It’s all a bit fuzzy. But I’m pretty sure I got shot and thrown in the river.”

“Well, sorry your soul wasn’t put to rest,” said Crassus, now realizing the truth in the old superstition that those who weren’t



given a proper burial would sometimes return as ghostly apparitions.

“Eh, don’t worry about it. Just tell me what you’ve been up to since my inconvenient departure,” he said.

“Not much. Planning to attack the Senate Building and overthrow the government. Same old, same old, really.”

Trajan grinned.

“You approve?” asked Crassus.

“Of course. But there’s just one other thing. It’s about Virginia. She’s up to something, I’m not sure what, that’s fuzzy too. Don’t trust her, though,” Traj warned him.

“I’ll be sure to do something about that,” Crassus promised.

“Oh, and Crassus,” said Traj, as his form began to flicker and sputter out of existence. “I fully intend to haunt you till the day you die.”

Crassus smiled.

“I wouldn’t have it any other way,” he replied as the apparition disappeared.

He stayed there for a moment, in reflection. Briefly, he wondered if what he saw and heard was real. Talk of ghosts was superstitious talk. And yet, he had seen it with his own eyes, even if he did just see what he had wanted to see.

He couldn’t take the chance of believing it wasn’t real, though. So he marched back out into the quarry with all that new information in hand.

Quickly, he found Virginia, who was resting next to Agatha in the backseat of one of the Praetorian cars.

He woke them both with a sharp knock against the metal door. “Virginia,” he said, “you’re going to sit this one out tomorrow.”

“What?” she asked, squinting sleepily up at him.

“You’re going to wait with Agatha at the safe house. As a matter of fact, you two better just go head there now.”



“Seriously Crassus?” asked Agatha as she got up.

“Completely serious,” he replied.

“Any particular reason why?” asked Virginia.

“I’ll tell you about it later,” said Crassus.

Agatha shot him an annoyed look.

“Fine,” said Virginia, walking towards the ramp that led back to the surface. “Whatever you say, mister bossman.”

Agatha groaned, and made to follow her, but she was stopped as Crassus grabbed her arm. “Whatever you do, don’t let her out of your sight,” he whispered to her.



## Chapter Fifty Six

### The Despair of a Blue Cap

The curtains were drawn and the lights were out. Only the slimmest and most defiant cracks of sunshine peeked through, keeping the room dim and thoroughly grey.

Serena was sitting on her bed in her medical school dorm. The bed was unmade, its sheets crumpled in the corner, and her arms were curled around her legs, holding them against her body and she rested her brow against the pale white wall.

She wasn't in her uniform, just the winter undergarments: a thin white cotton shirt and pants. The only thing that wasn't white or blue in her uniform were the socks, which were grey.

Serena hated the color grey and she hated those socks. They were so dreary and they made her feet sweat.

Her uniform, which she normally hung up when it was clean or immediately put in the laundry when she was done with it for the day, lay discarded, wrinkled and neglected on the floor.

Her eyes were dark and tired as she stared at the wall.

She had cried for a long time. But she couldn't cry anymore. She was too dehydrated now. There was a thirst in her throat that could have been quenched if she went downstairs and got a cup of water. Yet she didn't move.

For some reason, she half-expected Quintus to comfort her. To tell her that it was going to be alright, like he always did. But he couldn't. And that made her want to cry some more.

She whimpered to the wall.

He had always been there for her. And now, without him, it felt like the hearth that warmed her for so long had been doused.



Her feelings went far deeper than sorrow. Behind all her sadness lay darker thoughts, ones which she despised.

Serena always had a passion for helping people. She remembered breaking her arm as a little girl. It hurt so much, and she cried a lot then too. That was the same month she lost pet rabbit, Centurion Quigely. Ever since, she had done her best to ease the pain from injury, illness or death.

Being a Blue Cap was the most honorable profession she could imagine.

Not once, in all her life, did she truly want to defy that passion and be the one to cause pain and draw blood. Until now.

She wanted revenge. And she wanted to kill.

She hated herself for that.

Still, everything else within her shouted and begged for that revenge. *That justice.*

*"They killed Quintus!"* she lamented over and over again in her mind.

She wasn't sure who "*they*" were. Some people said it was the Tribune of Justice and Antony Purpura. Others said it was the gang of Anarchists. It didn't matter. She wanted them dead. Not just dead. She wanted them to suffer.

She hadn't slept much, and the few moments that she had, she didn't dream. It was just darkness.

She whimpered again as she tore herself apart.

There was a timid knock on the door.

"Hey, Serena?" asked the voice of a young woman. Serena recognized it as one of her pupils...Monica, she thought her name was. "They've been asking for volunteers to go down to the Senate Building for the protests. Do you think you might come?"

Slowly, she lifted her head. There it was, as if a gift from the most devious gods in the heavens. An opportunity waiting to be seized by her deepest and darkest desires.

"I'll be there..." she said softly.



## Chapter Fifty Seven

### Lights Out

The Senate Building had become a quiet place, at least on the inside. Outside resounded with the shouts and cries of the masses, but inside, it was eerily silent since most of the civil servants had been given leave so they wouldn't be in harm's way.

Atticus and Claudia sat next to each other on the edge of the Censor's desk.

Atticus had spoken to the Military Tribunes earlier that day while Claudia went out to the Burning Fasces safe house to ensure there had been no change in plans, informing them about the imminent attack on the Senate Building by the Anarchists. They had been skeptical at first, but once Atticus told them about the spy he had in their midst, they were more inclined to believe.

He had told the Tribunes to leave and take sanctuary at Camp Invigilus, but to send a telegram ahead so that the Legion could send more troops to ensure the stability of the city. But for now, there weren't enough Legionnaires to completely protect the Senate Building's perimeter, so unfortunately, some Praetorian Guards would be needed to keep protesters out during the whole ordeal.

As for the Burning Fasces themselves, Atticus had little doubt that they would be able to force their way into the building. And if they failed, it would only be at an inordinate cost of human life. The other alternative, to use Claudia's magic to try and stop them (as Atticus didn't feel suited to use it as a weapon himself)



was dangerous considering this was the only group in Caeruleus that might know how to respond to such a threat.

When the Anarchists arrived, the legionnaires would let them in, but once they were inside they would be locked in and held until reinforcements could arrive. He would be in the National Archives, with the skeleton staff of Civil Servants, but there was a chance the Anarchists would find him.

If they did find him, and they killed him, there would have to be a contingency plan for the government.

They hadn't had much time, but they were able to draft the agreement just before the military tribunes left. As they wrote it up, Atticus couldn't help but feel that they were composing his last will and testament.

*If, by acts natural or unnatural, the Censor should die before the selection of a new Senate by democratic means, a new interim government shall be formed. A council made up of the Military Tribunes, temporarily appointed Civilian Tribunes, and thirty-eight business, religious, and community leaders shall be created with the purpose of ensuring the transition to the re-establishment of the Senate and a normal state of government. These thirty-eight leaders are to be chosen at the discretion of the Tribunes, both military and civilian, by a vote with two-thirds majority for each potential councilmember. No member of the council may participate in any ongoing Senatorial election as a Candidate.*

*This council shall have the power to issue binding declarations of a temporary nature, which will only have the power of enforcement until two weeks after the first session of the reestablished Senate, and which may be backed by use of force when necessary, the power to allocate emergency funds, the power to address foreign entities in diplomacy, and the power to tax in order to ensure the funds needed for governing are procured. All*





*actions taken by the council must be done with the support of a two-thirds majority vote its members.*

*This council is to be disbanded upon the first session of the re-established Senate, and shall not have the power to appoint or expel magistrates of the courts.*

It was signed by all the tribunes in attendance, as well as Atticus.

Dying was not a prospect that Atticus liked to entertain, but the necessity of the situation required him to think forward.

But besides making him contemplate his own death, the situation also made him furious.

Antony had killed his best friend, brought instability to the country, and orchestrated the murder of over seventy innocents in broad daylight and then had the audacity to blame it on him.

If only he could find the bastard, then maybe this entire nightmare would be over...

He sighed.

"You okay?" asked Claudia.

"I don't know," he replied. He smiled bitterly. "I'm not even sure if we'll make it out of this alive."

"Just be careful," she said, squeezing his hand tightly. "And I'll be careful too. That's the best we can do for now. Even if that's not enough, and we're already trapped in the belly of a leviathan, at least we're trapped in it together."

"True..." Atticus squeezed back gently. "So what did you find at the Anarchist safe house?"

"Agatha was there, her hands tied behind her back, rubbing the knot against a rusty nail and shouting profanities like a mad woman. Apparently she was tasked to watch Virginia after Crassus got suspicious, and Virginia got the drop on her." Claudia took her yoyo from her pocket and gave it a few whirls as she thought about it. "I've got a feeling that she'll be here, probably somewhere in the crowd."



"I guess that's to be expected," he said.

"I'm going to go out and see if I can find her," said Claudia.

"You sure? I can send someone else instead."

"I don't think they'd be able to blend in as well."

"Yeah..." Atticus agreed reluctantly. "But you don't have a weapon."

"I've got a yoyo."

He frowned.

"I'll use magic to defend myself if I have to."

"I'm just worried, you know..." said Atticus.

"Yeah, I'm worried too." She put her yoyo back in her pocket, and hugged him, pulling him in close. "But we have to have hope."

"Yeah... I know..." he said quietly.

They stayed like that for a moment, just holding each other.

"I love you...Atticus," said Claudia.

Atticus leaned back, while still in her embrace, and looked at her in shock, a deep blush spreading across his face.

"Y-you what?"

Claudia smiled. She was surprised, just a little, by her declaration as well. Did she like Atticus? She liked him a lot. But did she love him?

She didn't know.

The time she'd spent around him was some of the best time she'd had, but she didn't know much about him or his past.

However, these were dangerous times in Caeruleus City. Times that could kill even the strongest and most powerful. If Claudia was to die, she wanted to die having said she loved someone or something.

Whether or not she truly did love him, well, that die was already cast. She had yet to see how it would land.



“I...I love you, too,” said Atticus. Unlike her, he truly felt that was true. He’d gone his whole life hoping he’d hear those words.

He couldn’t imagine why they would be spoken, but he did know that he found Claudia to be beautiful, intelligent, fascinating, and, most importantly, kind. That was reason enough for him to love her.

Claudia felt her heart flutter a bit, kissed him and then let him go.

“Come on,” she said, “It’s time to leave.”

They both retrieved their coats from the rack by the door, not noticing that they had taken each other’s. Knowing they would have to go about their duties now, they took a step towards the door.

But before they could leave, the lights flickered and cut off, plunging the office into darkness.

Atticus paused, and flicked the light switch up and down to no avail.

Claudia peered into the hall. “The lights are out here too.”

“Odd,” muttered Atticus, flipping the switch a couple more times before giving up. “...I think Flora keeps a flashlight in her desk for late night reading,” he said.

He stumbled with his hands far out in front of him, feeling for anything hard, until he bumped into her desk.

He searched through the drawers and eventually found what he was looking for. The beam of yellow light blinked on just as they heard the sound of people running in the hallway.

“Censor Perimsc! It appears the power has gone out!” exclaimed Clemens as he slid to a stop in the doorway, Ilius by his side.

“No kidding?” said Atticus, aiming the flashlight at him.

“Sir, considering the timing of this, I highly doubt it’s a benevolent coincidence,” advised the Captain.



“Censor Permisc! Censor Permisc!” called Flora who was running down the dark hall from the other direction. She rushed into the room breathing hard. “A telegram came in for you, right before the power went out.” She held up a folded piece of paper.

“Who is it from?” asked Atticus as he took it.

“We don’t know. No one’s ever used the telegraph from the historical center before.”

“Then why do we have a telegraph in the historical center?” he asked as he unfolded the paper.

“A telegraph is required for every publicly owned building,” said Clemens. “It’s in case of an emergency. Like the one time Flora and I were locked inside the south gate annex building—”

“Clemens!” exclaimed Flora.

“Yes?”

“Shut up!”

The two earned weird looks from all the others in the room.

Clemens pouted, but stayed silent, as did everyone else as Atticus began to read the note.

They all watched as the expression changed on their Censor’s face.

He read it once. Then twice. And as he read it for a third time, he jaw began to clench.

Claudia looked over his shoulder, and read it for herself. It sent a shiver down her spine.

Atticus closed his fist around the note, crumpling it, and then throwing it to the ground. He took a deep breath and then faced the others.

“Here are your orders,” he said with a new authority. “Evacuate the civilians. Anyone who’s still in the building, have them start barricading themselves in the National Archives. Clemens and Flora, they will be your responsibility. Take this flashlight. You’ll probably need it more than I do.



“Captain Ilius, go to the main entrance and make sure we’ve got control over the Praetorians. And for the love of anything sane left in this city, don’t let anybody fire a gun into that crowd! If we hand them one more injustice we could have a revolution on our hands by morning.”

Atticus swallowed, watching as they nodded, saluted and then did as they were told.

As they left, he looked back to Claudia.

“I guess this means Virginia and Antony will be making their move now.” She gazed at Atticus and he gazed back at her. They both wondered if their love would live to see another day.

“Just promise me you won’t do anything stupid,” said Claudia glancing to the note on the ground.

“He’s just trying to taunt me. Don’t worry.”

“I’ll try,” she said. She smiled a bittersweet smile. “I’ll see you soon.”

“Likewise,” said Atticus.

She turned, and made her way to confront her rival Paphonian. Atticus watched as she left, waiting until he could be sure she wasn’t coming back.

Suddenly he sprang into action, running back into his office. He collided with several walls and hard edges in the darkness before getting to his desk. He quickly retrieved his revolver and put it in his inner coat pocket.

Just before he stepped out, he picked up the note and recited the message one more time.

*You Lose*  
*-Sincerely, Antony*



This time he ripped it apart, letting the scraps fall to the ground as he began to run. He ran as fast as he could, his coat flapping behind him.

He passed Captain Ilius, who called out to him as he fled. “Where are you going?”

“To end this!” he proclaimed, not looking back as he set off to the Historical Center.

And so, with two opposing plans moving in action, a cloudless storm settled around Caeruleus City.

The Praetorian Guard advanced forward with their metal shields, keeping the masses off the sapphire steps of the Capitol.

Signs painted with anger were held aloft by the crowd to express their grievances.

Glass bottles flew through the air, and nightsticks beat down.

Flashes from the top of the steps illuminated needlessly in the daylight as Tros Euxin took his photographs.

Blue Caps stood both behind the Guards and behind the crowd, waiting to mend the broken, Serena Aurelius among their ranks.

Somewhere nearby lurked the Anarchists with their weapons of war.

Somewhere close to the heart of government crept the rogue agents of Marcus and Antony with their crisp purple uniforms.

Somewhere in the urban jungle hid Virginia as well, waiting and dreading her moment to come.

And somewhere, in the shadows, Mortis laughed boisterously at the thought of such deadly tension in the air.



## Chapter Fifty Eight

### An Irrelevant Duel

The Historical Center was a moderately popular destination for tourists and school fieldtrips. It was one of those places that was always there, in the background, holding some profound significance to scholars, but generally forgotten by those living their everyday lives.

However, for those who entered through its dark granite archway, and ran their hands against the smooth, ancient walls, there was a certain power and importance that couldn't be ignored.

Antony liked that feeling, it was one he had felt many times before, sitting where he sat now: at the table where the Decemvirate Council had once met.

The amethyst knife he'd used to swear his now broken blood oath was in his hand, being used to carve a design into the table.

There was a glass of water and a revolver on the table; the water rippling with every line he scratched into the old wood.

He didn't react as he heard the footsteps behind him. He just kept carving away.

"I never did like our country's motto: SPQC. Annoyed me more than anything. The Senate was weak, always thinking too small. And there should always be something greater than the people too, as far as symbolism goes," he scratched a little bit harder as he finished that sentence, completing a crooked pentagon. "As an empire, Caeruleus will need something new. I had a couple minutes to cook something up while you were on



your way over. Haven't figured out a motto yet, but I've worked out a nice new Imperial Seal. I started with this pentagon for the five godly patrons, there would be a firebird in the center for sheer awesomeness, arrows for strength on the left, and fasces for power on the right.

"While we're at it, let's change that dreadful state color scheme. I mean, *sky blue*? Sure I can see it for an accent piece or the backplash in my bathroom. But for everything? My eyes hurt every time I look at that dammed Senate Building. Purple is a much more regal color," he mused aloud. "But hey, they're just symbols."

He threw the crystal knife lazily to the side, and then rested his hand next to the revolver as he heard the amethyst clatter to the ground.

"Are you going to surrender?" asked Atticus flatly. He held his revolver by his side, his finger on the trigger.

"Um...no. What part of 'You Lose' did you not understand?"

"I could have brought Legionnaires with me," said Atticus.

"Yes, that's true. But you didn't. I had snipers stationed around the building in case you did. No, my dear Atticus. You came here because you wanted a rematch. You wanted to see what would happen if there was a fair fight between us. You wanted to find out if you could actually beat me. No foolish Senate to interfere, no Legion to protect you, and no Quintus Aurelius to hide behind. Just you. Just me."

Atticus looked at him with a confounded expression.

"Wow...you honestly think that everyone really is just as vain as you are..."

Antony blinked. "Come again?"

"I came here for a couple of reasons. Firstly, I wanted to either have the honor of arresting you and bringing you to justice as Quintus would have wanted, or have the pleasure of shooting





you dead to avenge him. Secondly, I am not afraid to die. If I die, the government has a plan for moving forward, and the people are appeased at the demise of a tyrant you painted as so wretched. But more importantly, if I die by the Anarchists' hands, Claudia might blame herself for my death. I would never want to hurt her like that, so I'd prefer to die here, where the only things to blame would be you and my own stupidity," explained Atticus.

"Well," said Antony, "you certainly seem confident in the survival of your precious government. But you should know, it doesn't even matter what happens here in this room. I still win. Things are in play that cannot be stopped. Everything that happens in this room, right now, is largely irrelevant to the fate of the Caeruleus. No matter what you do, the Empire will rise."

"Really? Even if you're not around to rule over it?"

Antony scoffed. "That's implying you can kill me. And anyway, I had an agreement with my friend Marcus that he would be the emperor in the new state when it was formed. He'd have earned it, considering it was his men who did most of the dirty work. Meanwhile, I'd be the Censor. Mind you, it won't be the useless position you were handed. I'll be in charge of providing the country with its truth and virtue. The one true version of history will be taught in our schools, and only the most virtuous art will be allowed to be made. People won't be allowed to lie or disagree anymore. I think the word censor will begin to take on a new meaning: to enlighten.

"Regardless, Marcus won't live forever. He's old. I am young. He'll be gone sooner rather than later, and when it happens, I'll be there to take the reins."

"I can agree with you on one point," began Atticus. "Perhaps what happens in this room will be irrelevant to the larger scheme of things. I have confidence in my people, and even if you manage to take the Senate Building, I'd hardly think you'll be able to survive the ensuing civil war you'd cause."



Antony shrugged. "I guess the world will just have to see."

"Is that so?" said Atticus. "Well, I'm going to give you one more chance. Will you surrender and come in peacefully?"

Antony smiled, gently picking up his gun. "No. I don't think I will."

"Then it looks like one of us is going to have to die."

"Indeed," said Antony. "Any last words?"

Atticus grinned, suddenly seized by the inspiration of a divine irony.

"Sic Semper!" he exclaimed.

Antony jumped out of his seat, cocking his revolver.

Atticus did likewise, and the two aimed their weapons at the other.

The sound of a single gunshot rang through the Historical Center as both the guns went off at once.



## Chapter Fifty Nine

### A Last Chance

From Virginia's vantage point, she could watch the whole calamity unfold. She could see the protesters, the Legionnaires, and the Praetorian Guards, all battering each other off to her right as well as the Anarchists approaching on her left. And past all that, in the distance was the entrance to the National Archives. Her vantage point was the roof of the Praetorian Guard watchtower that had been in disuse since a fire caused by a Burning Fasces arsonist, and she almost wished it didn't reveal all that it did.

For the moment, her eyes were set on the Anarchists, whose charge against the Capitol had just begun. They came at it from one of the smaller side-entrances, where protesters hadn't gathered. The Legion had been stationed there, but they hardly put up a defense as the stolen Praetorian trucks barreled up the steps and they were overwhelmed by the hundreds of ragtag warriors.

The Anarchists forced their way into the building, and quickly most of the soldiers surrendered. With the initial resistance seemingly taken care of, there was only a small contingent of Anarchists left to guard the entrance as the others pressed on.

It wasn't long before the Legionnaire reinforcements arrived and pushed at gunpoint the remaining Anarchists into the building, barring the door shut behind them.

Virginia's heart sank as those doors slammed closed. Their fates now seemed sealed.



Her orders were to kill them. Along with every legionnaire, and Praetorian Guard.

If she did it, it would be the most powerful feat of magic she'd done by far.

She wasn't even sure it was possible, but Antony was convinced she could do it.

The spell was one she had practiced over and over again: a story of a child ripping wings from a butterfly along with several other insects. It was a story that usually inspired a rage in her over the idea of such injustice. But now, every time she tried to speak the first few words, they became stuck in her throat. Every time she tried, she would think about what it would do. How it would rip her victims apart, limb by limb, vein by vein, cell by cell, atom by atom, until there was nothing left. They would simply vanish, as if they had never been there at all.

No more Anarchists.

What a twisted thought, that she'd kill the only people who had ever made her feel alive. All that fighting! All that running! All that laughing, and drinking, and shouting, and entertaining the thought that no one had a right to stop her. She realized she would miss that.

Just like she had missed the feelings Traj had stirred in her...

But there were darker things lurking in her mind as well. Thoughts about death, and his heftier cousin: murder.

Murder used to be such an alien concept to her, one that was always off in the distance and never touched her. She didn't murder. She fought, and those who died were simply casualties of war. Antony had told her it was alright to kill people for their cause. And with that justification, she never imagined that she was really responsible for all those deaths and everything death entailed. She never imagined herself as a murderer.



That is, until now, as she began to contemplate the loss she would feel for killing them. The same loss the loved ones of all the people she murdered endured.

But Antony said...

She frowned, and asked herself why she was doing this. Why she had done everything she did ever since she met Traj and began her grand deception.

Did she believe in this cause; the powerful Caerulean empire that lay on the horizon? It was the entire reason she was created and brought into this world. But, then again, it was never a cause she had chosen for herself.

Did she love Antony? Was all this an expression of devotion?

That one she could answer with more certainty.

No.

She knew love, if just for a moment, with Traj, and she had never felt that with Antony. Regardless, Antony couldn't love anyone. He may show affection, and perhaps pride in others, but there was no warmth behind it.

Then, perhaps she enjoyed it? Did she, in some twisted part of her mind, actually like to kill people?

Perhaps at first she had gotten some cheap thrill, but now, as she began to feel the weight of the consequences of her actions, that disappeared. In fact, ever since she had used her magic on the Senate and saw the terrified look on Claudia's face, Virginia had gotten a sickly feeling that refused to leave. It was as if her body itself was physically rejecting the idea that her actions were righteous.

She had stopped trying to perform the spell. She just stared into space, at the blurry horizon where the blue sky met the high rise buildings. The noise of the shouting, almost rioting crowd had become hypnotic to her ears. It stopped the words in her throat,



and stilled her hand from striking her own head in an attempt to dislodge herself from this helpless state.

They were all there according to the plan.

Every person in that crowd, in those ranks, or in that building wouldn't have been there if she hadn't done what she'd done.

Even Claudia, who had just blown the door down behind her with magic, and held her yoyo aloft like a weapon.

"Virginia!" she shouted, ready to fight. "Turn around and put your hands up."

So Virginia turned around slowly, as if still in her trance. As her eyes met Claudia's, something inside of her broke.

"A-are we enemies?" she asked.

This gave Claudia pause. "What did you say?"

"I...I never wanted to be your enemy..."

With a slow, shaky hand she withdrew the knife that was hidden up her sleeve.

Claudia's thumb finished the path of the tiny letters on the flat end of her yoyo.

Virginia didn't stand a chance. The word was fall.

And so she fell, collapsing to the ground as all her weaknesses became weight in her limbs, overcoming her. The dagger itself fell further, through the concrete and into the earth.

"I never..." she whimpered as she tried to hide her tear-filled face.

Claudia lowered her yoyo and walked towards her cautiously.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry," she cried. "I-I'm sorry for hurting you. I'm sorry for everything..."

Claudia wasn't certain if this was an act or not.

"This is all my fault..." she continued. "...everything..."



Claudia knelt down so they were eye level again. It didn't seem like a ploy. Virginia would never make herself look this vulnerable on purpose.

"You're really sorry?" she asked, furrowing her brow.

"I didn't know what I was doing," Virginia whispered.

Claudia didn't believe that entirely. After everything that she'd done, had she really elected to ignore the consequences of her actions?

But if Virginia was actually able to escape the pull and influence of her origins, of the illusory path of fate Antony had set out for her, she was stronger than she looked. For it meant she just might have the power to be the creative force behind her soul. That perhaps she was now looking at the girl who could have been her friend in a different life, and not Antony's servant.

She embraced Virginia, doing her best to make her onetime nemesis feel as though she was not the most vile thing in the world.

"I never wanted to be your enemy either," Claudia told her honestly.

Virginia stiffened against the hug, but then relaxed after a moment. She could hardly bare to reject it.

"Now this is important," Claudia said, "I need you to tell me what you were going to do up here. What was Antony planning?"

"I-I don't-"

"Virginia!"

She sniffled and diverted her eyes. "He wanted the Anarchists to attack the Senate Building so I could kill them... along with the Praetorians and Legionnaires guarding the building. But I ...I just couldn't."

"What else was he going to do?" pressed Claudia.

Virginia paused, collecting herself, and recalled the rest of Antony's master plan. "Before my spell he wanted to antagonize



the masses even more by sending in some guards to open fire on the crowd. Once all the Anarchists, guards and soldiers were dead, there would be no one to control the masses and riots would ensue.”

“And what about Marcus?”

“Marcus? ...he was supposed to arrange an ‘accident’ for the Military Tribunes, and he made an agreement with some senior officers in the Legion that they would be put in power in exchange for their support. Once all that was carried out, Praetorian Guards across the country would stamp out any remaining resistance. The New Empire of Caeruleus was set to be officially declared five days from today. As for Antony, he’s waiting for Atticus to confront him in the historical building.”

Claudia smiled. “Well, at least that last part isn’t going according to his plan.”

Virginia wiped the tears from her eyes and looked to Claudia curiously. “What makes you say that?”

“Atticus would never just go out and confront Antony on his own like that. That’d be idiotic.”

“But he did...”

“What?”

“I saw him.”

“What?!”

“He left through the National Archives exit, over there,” she explained, pointing to somewhere in the distance.

Claudia scrambled to her feet and forced Virginia up with her. “Take me to them!”

“B-but—”

“Now!” exclaimed Claudia, gripping her by the shoulders.

“Okay...okay...” she agreed. And so, Claudia half-dragged, half-led her out of the fire-scorched watchtower, leaving her old purpose and plan far behind.





## Chapter Sixty

### Serena Aurelius

**B**lue Caps were in heavy supply and demand that day, both for the protesting civilians and the Legionnaires and Praetorians who held them back.

Serena attended to her duties in the atrium of the Senate Building, where the nurses had set up shop.

Medical equipment was everywhere, and cots were set up for the wounded. All the nurses moved with haste, one grabbing an antiseptic for a Guard cut by a broken bottle, and another getting bandages for a Guard who had broken his ankle falling backwards on the sapphire steps.

A Legion Sergeant sat on one of the cots, holding a bag of ice to his brow while Serena inspected his head.

“Looks like a concussion,” she told him. “How exactly did it happen?” she asked, glancing over to the crowd that was visible through the open doors.

He squinted, trying to remember. “I think someone threw a sign at me...”

It was entirely likely. There was so much getting thrown around in that plaza, both in violence and in language, that some people had to have been struck.

The roar of the masses permeated the air all around the Capitol. Somewhere in the mix were the shouts of police ordering the protesters back. Signs splattered with red paint proclaimed “**DEATH TO THE KING**”, and “**DOWN WITH THE CENSOR**”. Yet, as much distaste the crowd declared for Atticus, it spat out twice as much for the Praetorians. The chants alternating



from “WE WILL END THIS POLICE STATE!” and others asking for justice upon “true” Terrorists.

“Uhh, Miss...”

“Yeah...” said Serena absent mindedly, staring at the chaos.

“Is that all?”

“Huh?” She turned her attention back to her patient.

“I kind of have some things that I need to deal with,” he tilted his injured head towards the ruckus.

“Yes, just one moment, sir,” she said distantly.

She reached off into the bag of medicine she brought with her and retrieved a bottle of clear liquid and a syringe.

He gulped when he noticed the needle. “That really necessary?” he asked.

“Standard procedure,” she assured him.

That didn’t make him appear any less anxious.

“So, I’ve heard the reason you’re locking the doors to the rest of the building is because there is going to be a bunch of Anarchists running loose. Is that true?” she asked as she prepped the injection.

He nodded and pulled out a brass key from his pocket as if to make sure he still had it. It was the one which went with the inner atrium doors. “Yeah, that’s my understanding as well. Funny idea. No guarantee someone won’t get hurt though. The skeleton crew was still evacuating last time I checked. And if those vagrants manage to break their way into the National Archives then they’re all done for. If only we had more men, we’d be able to deal with this in a much more straightforward way.”

“But if you had the manpower, wouldn’t you just get into a firefight with them? Wouldn’t more people die that way?”

“Yeah, but there’s a difference between dying as a soldier and being slaughtered as a civilian. That’s what we tell ourselves, anyway.”



Serena glanced up to a mosaic on the opposite wall. It depicted the Caerulean Legion laying waste to the Siffurians, a nation which had once inhabited what was now Northeastern Caeruleus.

It was a magnificent piece of art, making the Legion look mighty in their blue and gold uniforms, with the stormy weather above them having it seem as though they commanded the forces of nature itself, and portraying the Siffurian warriors as disorganized and overwhelmed in the face of such power.

The army and government of Siffuria was destroyed in the war. But the civilians also paid a hefty price, for those who were murdered, raped, and had their land pillaged all those hundreds of years ago. Their suffering was immeasurable.

It was the end of the world for the Siffurians who had their lives, their loved ones, or their way of life torn away.

The descendants of the surviving Siffurians were given citizenship several generations later for their assistance in a war against Rubicund, and with their assimilation into the nation of Caeruleus their lost world was forgotten and only the glory of Caeruleus remained.

“Is your life more valuable than the civilians down in the archives?” asked Serena. “I’m not asking because I think you shouldn’t protect them, because ultimately you’d probably save more lives that way. But if you had a choice between your death, and the death of two of those bureaucrats, what would you choose?”

The soldier smiled nervously. “I’d probably let them die.”  
“Why?”

He shrugged. “Because I’m a selfish bastard.”

“But you admit it, the right thing to do would be to let yourself die, if you knew it would prevent their suffering. After all, no one’s suffering is more important than another’s. You have a broad responsibility as a human to prevent other people’s



suffering. And just like me, you also have a more specific responsibility to the state that says you should prioritize lessening the suffering of the citizens of Caeruleus.”

“Um...why don’t you hurry it up with that needle of yours,” the Sergeant said uneasily, forgetting his earlier hesitation.

Serena paid his discomfort no heed. She was consumed with her thoughts.

What she had not mentioned was her own suffering.

It hadn’t gotten any easier, living with Quintus gone. But like she had said, her suffering was not more important than anyone else’s suffering. At least, not in her eyes.

“If the world ended within the hour,” she began as she primed the needle, “and I could stop one minute of suffering for everyone at the price of one minute of suffering for myself, it’d be worth it, wouldn’t it?”

“I-I suppose...” he replied. “What makes you go on about stuff like that, anyway?”

Serena smiled sweetly. “What can I say? I’m a utilitarian.”

With that, she took the needle, stabbed it into his arm and pushed down on the plunger.

“Ow!” he exclaimed. But his dismay quickly faded as his eyes drooped, and he fell back on the cot in unconsciousness as the sedative kicked in.

Serena looked around to make sure no one had noticed. Once she was positive, she quickly retrieved the brass key and the pistol from his belt.

She walked deliberately to one of the doors that lead to the rest of the building. Once she had unlocked them, she tossed the key over her shoulder and then entered the hall.

After she closed the door behind her, she began to run, her cap flying off as she did. She didn’t bother to pick it back up.

Her earlier cold rationality was gone. Perhaps it had never been there to begin with.



The justifications for her action, her plan, and everything those two things entailed were fuzzy in her mind.

But her pressing need for revenge and the opposing purpose of preventing suffering that she held in her heart were as clear as ever.

She flew on her feet down the empty falls, past the dark offices, and past a mess of top secret files that had been forsaken in this day's haste.

Serena searched for the Anarchists who had dared to defile this hallowed ground, glancing down every hallway she passed. She was determined to stop them.

She was at it for a long while, and had just begun to worry that she wouldn't find them, when, at last, she heard a voice around the next corner.

She skidded to a stop in the center of the intersection of the two halls and cocked the gun she had stolen.

The warriors from the Burning Fasces all halted suddenly, taken aback at the sight of a nurse pointing a pistol at them.

Serena sized them up.

Half of them were teenagers. One or two maybe even a tad younger than she was.

All of them were covered in red paint. It was on their clothes and on their skin, announcing their intentions of anarchy in this place of government. They were armed with clubs, bats, knives and guns.

The one who looked like their leader spoke up. But he didn't point his gun, or raise his voice.

"Hey Blue Cap, what are you doing?" asked Crassus.

Serena realized her hands were shaking as she heard those words.

He had called her a Blue Cap. The name for healer, caretaker, and mender of the broken in her culture.

That was her.



Before that moment, there had been some ambiguity about what her choice would be. But that was gone now.

Her hands still shaking, she raised the gun.

Crassus's eyes widened, the faint memory of how he had threatened this woman so long ago coming to his mind. "What do you think you're doing?!" he exclaimed, lunging forward to stop her. But he was too late.

The cold barrel of the gun touched the bottom of Serena's chin. She pulled the trigger.

The end of the world was upon her.



## Chapter Sixty One

### One More to Die

The loud blast from the guns rang in Atticus and Antony's ears. They both stared at the other for a moment, stunned, then began to shift their gaze down, searching for a small hole and a red splotch on the other's clothes.

Atticus, upon finding no such signs on Antony, quickly ran a hand up and down his chest to check if he had been the one to get hit. But he found nothing except a speck of lint on his collar which he promptly flicked away.

It was just then when they both saw the star-shaped piece of lead on the ground.

The bullets had collided in mid-air.

They met each other's gaze for a moment.

"...damn..." muttered Antony.

They realized this was going to be a tad harder than they'd anticipated, and so they both dashed for cover, firing wildly as they did.

**BANG!! BANG!!** went the revolvers as they hid behind stone columns on opposite sides of the room. Neither shot hit its mark.

Atticus took the moment to take a deep breath. He was at a clear disadvantage. Antony knew this place much better than him, and he couldn't see much of the room with the dim torch light from around the table.

He couldn't allow this to devolve into a shootout where he'd easily be outmaneuvered, not if he wanted to win.

Atticus bit his lip, but settled on a new course of action.



“Hey Antony!” he called. “I just gotta ask. What drove you to do all this? I mean, I gathered that you’re completely nuts. But there’s got to be something more than that.”

As he waited for a reply, he pulled back the hammer of the revolver, preparing for his next opportunity.

There was a guffaw from Antony’s dark corner. “What? You really want to know? Well, how kind of you Atticus. We’ve never really had a time to just *chat* before.

“I’m only doing what any man should in my position. Being a man means having strength, having strength means having the resolve and having resolve means fighting for what is absolute truth, and what is true, well, I suppose you already know by now that I think that’s the superiority of Caeruleus. We are the descendants of one of the oldest civilizations, the legacy of one of the richest and most powerful empires in history, and we make our home in the cradles of humanity and the gods. We were good. We were great. I just want to get that back,” said Antony, with complete certainty.

Atticus frowned. He didn’t doubt that was what Antony believed. It was probably something imposed in him from birth by his father, and nurtured in his own narcissism.

“If everybody was willing to kill to defend what they thought was true, we’d all be dead!” Atticus shouted angrily. “You want to be a Virtus-damned man? Then own up to the responsibility handed to you by your humanity and by your country! Stop this madness before more people get killed!”

“Oh come now Atticus,” said Antony, his voice no longer where it had been before. Atticus glanced around the room, but he couldn’t quite pin down where he was. “Almost every truth is backed by someone with force. History goes to the victor, faith goes to the survivor, and virtue goes to the powerful. If I have to kill people to impose truth, then I’m fine with that. I’ll start with you.”





A shot was fired from Atticus' right, narrowly missing him. He ducked instinctively and scrambled forward. He retaliated with a shot of his own in Antony's general direction.

"You're going to make Caeruleus descend into civil war!" he exclaimed once he was safely behind another pillar. "Hundreds, maybe thousands will die! Can't you care about anyone but yourself!?"

"Of course I can. I cared about my father, and I care about Virginia. I love them both. After all, a piece of my father became a piece of me with all the wisdom he passed down, and a piece of me was passed down to Virginia the same way. If I didn't love them, I wouldn't be able to love myself," replied Antony.

Atticus knew he was getting nowhere this way. Ethical or emotional appeals were useless with Antony.

Suddenly, he had an idea.

"Alrighty then, I'm not gonna try to convince you to stop being an insufferable maniac anymore," said Atticus. "But I would like to get this over quickly, if that's fine with you. And didn't you say that you wanted us to finally put our skills up against each other, see who would win in a fair fight? Well, considering our shooting so far, I don't think there's really much skill to be had. Any bullet that hits its mark would be pure luck. I propose a different way."

"Like what?" came Antony's curious voice.

Atticus smiled. He had him.

"Obviously, since Virginia is your Paphonian, you must be capable of magic. You probably already know that I am too. Let's have a magician's duel. That way, whoever wins will be the most skilled in magic," he explained.

In this area, Atticus felt he had a distinct advantage that Antony couldn't know about. He had actually fought in a battle with magic before, and if that battle had been decided on skill alone, he might have very well won.



There was a pause from Antony as he contemplated the proposal.

“Don’t tell me you’re scared of a fair fight after all that grandstanding you threw at me earlier!” said Atticus, trying to bait him on.

That was all it took.

“Well, I for one can recognize a tactical ruse when it presents itself. But if you insist,” said Antony.

With that permission, Atticus began to proceed.

“There was once this fellow named Dorian Dedilee. An orphan child, living on the streets. And though he could count by the thousand the people he saw, there was not a soul with him in his world. No friend, no family, not even an enemy,” said Atticus, closing his eyes and picturing the boy in his cruel city.

Antony started his own story, one about the old god Lucifer, lord of the twilight’s first star. Atticus paid it little attention. That one he already knew, of the empty beast in the far reaches of space, which stole and hoarded the gift of gleaming silver that Terra had intended for Caelum, making it the brightest star in the sky.

He simply concentrated on his own tale.

“There came one day, when he sat among his rags and filth on a street corner, that little Dorian’s life did change forever. The whole city was abuzz, preparing for the arrival of a foreign dignitary of the highest stature, one who the king was eager to please. So the king’s men, quick to please their master, set about clearing the streets, but they did not find young Dorian. He had hidden himself in the gutter since he was curious to see, if for just a moment, the passing royalty.

“He was still there, to poke his head out and watch with the rest of the crowd, all donned in their finest clothes, as the king and the emissary were paraded by. The king was the first to come, and when he looked over his subjects, Dorian Dedilee, the dejected urchin, stood out in his dirtiness. With a wave of his hand, the



king sent his men to remove the poor child, and so Dorian was dragged away before the visiting dignitary could lay eyes upon him with the pity of a stranger.”

Antony continued on with his story, deriving his power from the sheer grandioseness as he gave justification for Lucifer’s actions. Atticus didn’t open his eyes to check what threat his nemesis’ magic posed. He didn’t care.

“Dorian was thrown in the dungeon, into a dark cell that was even dirtier than he was. And that was where he was left. They had only given him a candle for companionship, which was still more than he had before. While he felt sad because he was trapped in such a horrible place, he was grateful for such a precious gift.

“Years passed, and Dorian was forgotten in that dirty cell of his. The reason he was there was forgotten, his name was forgotten, and eventually, his life outside his prison was forgotten. All that was left was the meal the guards delivered once a day, twice on holidays, and his candle. It was the most beautiful thing in the world to him.

“It was a magic candle, one which always burned and never melted. He would spend his days watching the ever flickering and twisting flame. He pretended it would tell him stories and give him comfort. It came to pass that he fell in love with that fire. He would think such longing thoughts about the single thing which gave him warmth and light, even though he knew he would never have those feelings returned. After all, it was only a candle’s *job* to provide those things, and nothing more.”

It was at this point that Atticus began to sense a familiar feeling swelling up inside of him, one that he knew would give his spell the potency he needed. He could already smell something different in the air, which foreshadowed the magic’s intent.

“One day, a drunken and bitter guard was rambling through the dungeon. The candle hurt his eyes with its brightness. So he



opened the cell, beat Dorian to the side, and with just one irresponsible breath, blew out the flame.”

Atticus smiled, the fury that he was acquainted with at every thought of Antony was tingling in his appendages.

He could hear Antony begin to stutter and haltingly pause his verses. He could hear the encroachment of fear. So he raised a finger, as if to pose a question: a question that would hopefully not only mean the beginning of the end of the story, but also the end of Antony.

“So do you know what little, meek, Dorian Dedilee did?” asked Atticus, now moving out from the cover of the pillar. “He took a discarded pair of shackles and drew them around that wicked guard’s neck. And he exclaimed ‘You killed him! You killed my dearest friend!’ as he strangled him ‘For that, you shall die!’”

Atticus’ eyes snapped open and saw the thick smoke his magic had summoned, wrapping itself around Antony who grew more and more panicked as he began to choke. The pitiful stolen silver light around his palms was useless against Atticus’ magic.

“For that. You. Shall. Die.”

The smoke, which smelled the same as a blown out candle’s, became thicker still at the whim of Atticus’ rage.

Antony, in a final act of desperation, grasped the granite column beside him. The magic in his palms grew bright for a moment.

And then the column exploded.

Chunks of rock flew in every direction. Two slammed into Antony, and one flew right into Atticus’ shoulder.

Just like that, the spells were broken.

They both groaned on the floor for a moment, but Antony was quickest to recover, now furious for being forced to show a second of fear and weakness.

They each fired a shot as they tried to get to their feet, both bullets flying wildly into the ceiling.



Antony was the first to recock his gun, and so Atticus dove for the nearest cover: the large wooden table. The next bullet whizzed right by his neck, but he made it.

He twisted around under the table, and returned fire, trying to hit Antony's legs. He missed as well, but that was enough cause for Antony to jump onto the table to evade further attacks.

Atticus crawled over to the other side of the table, hoping he could surprise his enemy from behind.

He prepared his revolver one more time as he crouched at the table's edge. And then he sprang up.

He was met with a swift kick to the jaw, his shot firing uselessly to the side as he fell, shocked, to the floor. His gun slid out of reach as his head collided with the ground.

"Like I said," said Antony as he stood over Atticus, aiming his gun right between his eyes, "you lose."

But before he could pull the trigger on that fatal shot, the doors to the room flew open.

Antony turned to see who it was, but his aim didn't shift. He furrowed his brow in confusion.

"Virginia?" he asked as she tepidly walked in. "What are you doing here? You should still be at the Senate Building."

Virginia said nothing. She just moved to the side, and refused to meet his gaze.

Emanating from the hallway was a sickeningly-colored red light, and everything it touched began to melt. The granite it shined upon drooped, and began to seep down.

Into the room came the source of the light: Claudia. She had just finished telling a story brimming with righteous anger, and she cast the light forward, towards Antony.

Antony frowned, and walked down the length of the table to her. His clothes and his hair were the first things affected by the magic, both of which had begun to liquefy, but he paid that no heed.



Atticus, seeing his chance, scrambled for his revolver.

Once he was close enough, Antony lunged forward, striking her on the throat. Claudia collapsed onto the ground in a fit of coughing; all while he trained his final shot towards her head.

Atticus grabbed his gun, pointed it at Antony, and pulled the trigger. The hammer snapped down, but it didn't fire.

He was out of bullets.

The mastermind who had brought the entire country to its knees was poised to kill Claudia.

As he held his finger on the trigger time, everyone, save Antony, was seized in a moment of terror.

And then the moment passed...

No shot fired.

No trigger was pulled.

Claudia's coughing ebbed away, and her breathing returned.

The gun dropped from his hand, and clattered to the ground.

Antony looked down and stared in shock at the amethyst knife protruding from his chest. As the blood began to seep into his clothes, he realized it had gone straight through his heart.

"Virginia?" he said softly in disbelief.

She walked towards him from where she had retrieved the ancient weapon.

"That's enough," she said simply.

He shook his head, unable to comprehend, and stumbled back. He fell onto the table of the Decemvirate Council, unable to support himself.

His oath-breaking blood seeped onto the wood, transforming the last vestige of his ancestors' ambition into an ordinary exhibit in a museum as he bled to death.



## Chapter Sixty Two

### The Secretaries

The descending stairwell to the National Archives was filled with the sound of storming footsteps. A stream of civil servants poured down, holding onto stacks and stacks of disorganized papers which were too valuable to abandon and they hadn't had the time to destroy. There was still no power in the Senate Building, and the only illumination was from the narrow beams of light from the emergency lanterns and flashlights they carried with them.

At the top of the stairwell were Flora and Clemens, shouting and urging on the evacuation.

"Once you get down there, go as far back as you can," said Flora to the running evacuees.

"Start taking things to barricade the doors," added Clemens. "Anything you can find, tables, bookshelves, comfy chairs...anything!"

"Yes sir!" said one of the passing bureaucrats.

When the last few people descended, they followed them down.

"And no checking books out at this time!" Flora shouted as they entered the National Archives.

It was an eerie place with all the lights out. The fleeing civil servants were rushing in between the rows of bookshelves, looking for anything they could use to block the doors.

Clemens cringed as they started tossing books off a shelf to use it. "On second thought, how about we utilize furniture that'll cause less of a mess."



Flora grabbed his arm and led him forward; knowing they had to make sure the back entrance was also secure. “Better the books be on the floor than have the Anarchists spilling our blood on them.”

They pressed on, passing by the panicked men and women they were responsible for, as well as a number of ancient ornamentations that adorned the walls such as a bust of the country’s twenty-first consul, and a pair of antique swords.

There were not many people down there. Those who had wanted to leave, and take their chances with the outside world, were allowed to. The people left were the brave ones, the stupid ones, or the ones too stubborn to let the Anarchists have complete control of the place.

Clemens and Flora had decided together to stay, not just because it was their orders, but because the Senate Building was their home. At the southwest edge, in what had once been the King’s servant quarters, was the public housing provided by their position.

They were humble domiciles for being in a building made out of solid sapphire, but they had grown attached to them. So when the Senate Floor exploded, it was more than attack on their country, their friends, or their democracy. It was an attack on their home.

They didn’t abandon it then, and they weren’t about to abandon it now.

After walking awhile, they finally came to the back entrance, where the first ones who had come down had just finished barricading the door.

“What’s our status?” asked Clemens.

A man from the department of agriculture was just about to reply when there came a loud banging from the other side.

“Open up! This is the Praetorian Guard!” shouted an authoritative voice.





“Oh come on!” said the tired department of agriculture worker.

“Wait,” said Flora, putting up her hand before they could go about dismantling the giant pile of bookshelves and chairs. She leaned forward and put her ear up against it. “What’s the password?”

“Password?”

“Yeah what’s the password?”

“Uh...hippopotamus?”

“No.

“Edification”

“No.”

“Floccinaucinihilipilificationous.”

“Not quite.”

“Does it have a vowel in it?”

“Mmmmaybe.”

“Gah! There is no password!”

“Sorry, that’s not it.”

“Open up or else I shoot your Virtus-dammed face off!”

“You can’t see me. I’m behind a door!” shouted Flora defiantly.

Clemens swallowed, and made to drag her away from anywhere she could be shot at. But before he could, a cold hand gripped his shoulder.

“No need for such confrontation, my friends,” spoke a voice behind them.

Clemens and Flora whirled around, and saw a Praetorian Captain standing there. He had a sickly air about him, but he stood there with a smile nonetheless.

“These guards are with me,” he said, “And if you would be so kind to let them in, it would be much appreciated.”



“...alright,” said Flora uneasily. She motioned for the guy from the department of agriculture to help her dig a path to the doors.

Clemens pitched in a little too, but he didn’t shift his gaze away from the strange Praetorian who only stood there, clasping his hands as he waited.

“So...how are things going up above?” Clemens asked.

“Oh, the situation is constantly devolving. Things might take a turn for the tragic any moment. Which is precisely why we need these men. For when the situation becomes downright murderous.” He didn’t stop smiling.

“Good to know.”

Eventually, they were able to make a path to the door, and the small group of Praetorians on the other side was allowed in. As soon as they laid their eyes on the captain though, they all grew pale; as if they had just seen a ghost.

If he noticed their obvious fright, he didn’t let on. “Well men, no time to waste. Civil unrest waits for no one.” He tapped the gun holstered on his belt. “Let’s get started.”

“Y-yes, sir,” said one of the more composed guards.

The captain moved to leave, leading the way. But Flora stopped him.

“I wouldn’t want to inconvenience, but would it be possible for you strapping young lads to maybe, perhaps, stick around until this whole ordeal blows over? We really don’t have much protection otherwise.”

Clemens sent her a frown at the mention of such “strapping young lads.”

“Sorry ma’am,” said the Captain, “our orders were very clear. But, if all goes according to plan, you won’t be worrying about the Anarchists for much longer.”

“Well, good luck,” said Clemens, sitting down on an overturned bookshelf. “We’ll just be waiting here.”



“Of course,” said the Captain, “just stay put. Everything will remain perfectly under control.”

As the Praetorian Guards left, Flora joined Clemens on the bookshelf. She felt that she had earned a small rest.

The Senate Building was a huge place, filled with intersecting hallways and sprawling offices. It had taken them forever to find everyone so they could evacuate them, even with them running all the way.

“This doesn’t feel like a particularly pleasant situation...” commented Clemens.

“In what way?” asked Flora.

“You know, the ongoing destruction of our government and society,” replied Clemens.

“I have faith in Censor Permisc and his plan.”

“I do too. It’s still a very unpleasant situation,” said Clemens.

“Well, what will make it more pleasant?” asked Flora.

“Pardon?” said Clemens.

“The situation. What would make it more pleasant?”

“Well...for one, Flora, you could decide to marry me.” The question was asked simply and with the levity of a passing remark, but held the weight of potbellied rhinoceros. Clemens felt his heart making a lump in his throat as he waited for an answer.

Flora grinned, amused and overjoyed.

“Done,” she quickly agreed. “And for two...” She grabbed Clemens by his shoulder and planted a kiss on his lips.

The evacuees around them, who had been doing their best to mind their own business up until that point, were now staring awkwardly. And they stared for a good long while.

When their kiss finally ended, Flora was even giddier than before. “We should start planning!” she exclaimed excitedly, the gears in her mind already whirring in this new direction. “Where should we have the ceremony? Mom always said it should be on a



beach, like hers, but the only beach we have is that one little strip of sand by the river. So...how about... the Senate Building! I'm sure we could convince Censor Permisc to let us!"

"I like it," said Clemens, grinning as well. "And we could ask the cafeteria to cater some Pavonem Sandwiches."

"The ones they make for lunch?" asked Flora skeptically.

"No! Of course not! The ones they served for the New Year's feast!"

Flora nodded, "I guess that works."

"Should I assume you already have a wedding dress picked out?"

Flora scoffed. "What do you take me for? I had it picked out when I was nine."

"Does it have pockets?"

"I was planning on sewing them in myself."

"Sounds like a plan. Shall I put an orange veil on my shopping list?"

"And a diamond ring, you red-haired rascal!" Flora said playfully. "I also hope you know that if we're going to be married then you'll need to get rid of that potted plant."

"I just had that there to annoy you," he confessed.

"I know, Clemens. I know..." she said.

Suddenly, his eyes growing in alarm, Clemens threw his arm out to stop her, hitting her in the chest.

She glanced down and then back to him.

"And you know what else?" asked Clemens, staring wide-eyed into the distance.

"What?"

"Those Praetorian Guards had guns on them."

"So?"

"Censor Permisc ordered that none of the Praetorian Guards carry guns in order to protect the protesters and stave off further unrest."



They both turned and looked at each other for a moment, as if checking for confirmation that what they suspected was true. Then they started sprinting towards the stairwell.



Outside, the Praetorian Guards and Legionnaires were a human barrier of steel plated shields and flesh, taking up the first several levels of steps.

But on the very top step, was a small group of Guards apart from the rest.

They were different from the others: calm, standing still, not shouting, not fighting, not concerned with the anger of the mob. However, this tranquility only served to mask the anxiousness shivering in their eyes.

That is, except for the one who wore the Captain's uniform.

He hummed happily to himself as he pulled out his gun and checked to make sure it was loaded.

"You know gents," he said, "a bullet isn't a very deadly thing in of itself. It's the explosion of expanding gases behind it, propelling it forward at fantastically lethal speeds that does all the work. Without all that, a bullet's just a chunk of metal. Amazing what you humans can do with a little salt peter, sulfur and charcoal.

"All the same, a human isn't that much either if they're not moving. You want humans to do a lot of damage, you put momentum behind them. If it's just one or two, you need quite a bit. But if you've got enough humans focused on the same thing, well, then you'll only need the tiniest, ittiest bit. Perhaps even a couple grams of lead would do the trick."

Mortis chuckled to himself as he cocked the gun. "But hey, what do I know about humans?"



He raised the gun, aiming it indiscriminately into the crowd.

Reluctantly, the others took their guns and then aimed them as well.

But before they could unleash their volley, the steel hilt of a sword collided with Mortis' chin.

In an instant they were surrounded by Legionnaires, all with their guns drawn, as well as two secretaries armed two very decorative looking swords they had stolen from the walls of the National Archives.

"What you were doing, right there, that's a bad idea," said Flora, pressing the tip of her sword gently onto Mortis' throat while he was still dazed from the blow Clemens had landed.

"Oh but those are my favorite kind of ideas," he replied, even as the rogue guards all surrendered their weapons.

"I'll take this," said Captain Ilius, quickly taking the gun away from Mortis before turning to Clemens and Flora. "Thank you for your assistance in apprehending these terrorists, Ms. Magona and Mr. Mantine. Caeruleus owes you a great debt."

"And I assure you that debt is payable in either check or cash," said Clemens,

A camera flash went off behind them, and Tros Euxin smiled knowingly as he took his photographs.

As the Captain and the Secretaries shifted their attention to the other guards, he stepped behind Mortis and placed a hand on his shoulder.

"You see, sometimes even the most far-flung hopes do come to fruition," said Tros.

"And yet, young Spero, those far-flung hopes are always the easiest to dash."

Mortis vanished from within Tros' grasp, and before anyone could stop him, he had retrieved one of the guns his comrades had forsaken.



**BANG!!**

**BANG!!**

**BANG!!**

And just like that, the deed was done.

Tros tackled him to the ground after the third shot, preventing him from getting off anymore.

“You bastard!” he shouted, as he pummeled Mortis across the face. But no matter how many times Tros struck him, he didn’t lose that stupid, proud grin.

The crowd had flinched back and retreated for a moment, stunned by the gunfire.

Only one man was hit. And he was hit in the head.

He lay there, motionless in the plaza.

After the first few seconds of shock passed, someone rushed forward who looked similar enough to be that man’s brother. He cradled the dead man’s head in his arms, and tried, futilely, to put the bits of skull and brain back where it had come from, all the while crying out “You’ve killed him! What have you done! You’ve killed him!”

Captain Ilius tried to step forward, to say something. Perhaps he was going to call a medic, or apologize, or explain, or urge calm. But he was never given the chance as the crowd rushed forward, now with the total fury of a riotous mob, louder and stronger than ever before.

The line of guards and soldiers was pushed back by the sheer force of them all.

“You bastard!” shouted Tros once more, still beating Mortis’ incorporeal body as he felt his sense of hope fade away to one of helplessness while the citizens of Caeruleus waged war on their Senate Building.



## Chapter Sixty Three

### The Magicians

**A**tticus, Claudia, and Virginia stood mutely as they stared at the body of Antony Purpura.

Despite everything that had happened, and all the atrocities he committed, he remained a pitiful sight in death.

Atticus was the first to move his eyes away from the morbid scene. After a deep breath, he spoke.

“Thank you...Virginia.”

She closed her eyes tightly. “Don’t do that. Ever.”

Claudia turned her head away from the dead body and swallowed. “Atticus...” she said quietly. She reached out and gently pulled him away from the scene. Atticus followed her without resistance towards a half-melted column.

“Why did you come here?” she asked, unable to look him in the eyes.

“I...”

“You promised you wouldn’t!”

“I...I just had to. I had to end it,” Atticus told her quietly.

Claudia looked up, her expression contorted, caught between anger, and sorrow, and a thousand things in between. A muscle in her cheek quivered, and she angrily raised her hand. Atticus flinched, but the sharp pain from a slap never came. The hand touched his cheek without force behind it. Her fingers tensed and relaxed and tensed again against his skin, but she couldn’t bring herself to hurt him, no matter how angry she was with him.

That was when she knew she loved him.





“Never, ever, do that again!” she said, as she cringed and shook her head. “Please. I thought I’d lost you...”

“I’m sorry,” whispered Atticus.

Claudia pulled him into a tight embrace. She never wanted him to leave that spot by her side. Atticus put his hands around her and hugged back and felt her wet eyelashes brush against his neck.

“I don’t...I don’t know...what I would do without you...” she told him.

“I was stupid. Very, very stupid. But hey, we’re both still alive,” he said, trying to comfort her, even as he felt wave after wave of guilt crash over him.

The sound of Virginia moving distracted him from Claudia for a moment.

He turned his head and watched as she closed Antony’s eyes. The simple gesture of respect for the dead brought Atticus back into the real world.

He kissed Claudia’s forehead and let her go. “We’ll have to talk about this later. There are still loose ends that need to be tied.”

“Virginia said Antony had some guards who were going to provoke the protesters, and that Marcus was going to try to assassinate the Military Tribunes,” said Claudia, wiping her damp eyes with her coat sleeve.

“Ok...” said Atticus, thinking about it for a moment. “As far as the Military Tribunes go, we should be able to send a telegram from here to camp Invigilus to warn them. But if they actually manage to get the crowd rioting, we’ll need to find a way to calm them down, or at least find a way to let them know we’re addressing their grievances. Do you have any ideas?” he asked.

“I don’t know... most of those people in the plaza wanted to see you dead when I was down there. Maybe...no...no, that won’t work...”



“What?”

“We, I suppose, could try to use magic to knock them out...but that crowd is enormous. I mean, there’s a lot you can do with magic, but the most I’ve ever taken out with it is about a hundred or two, and there’s several thousand out there. Is it even possible to do magic on a scale like that?”

“I don’t know,” said Atticus pensively.

“Especially with just the two of us?”

“We’d have to be near the center of the Senate Building to be sure that we can reach everyone around the building.”

“Even then,” said Claudia skeptically.

Atticus paused, and suddenly turned his gaze back to the third person in the room. The silent mourner was up against one of the stone columns, her hand over her mouth as she stared with a void in her eyes towards the floor.

Atticus glanced tentatively to Claudia, but then began walking lightly towards Virginia.

She didn’t even look at him.

“We need your help,” he said.

“No. You don’t.”

“We do.”

“I think I’ve done enough for your cause. Leave me alone.”

Atticus sighed. “I’m sorry. But...if you don’t help us, everything you went through here will have been for nothing.”

“Claudia said your men could deal with the guards.”

“We don’t know that for sure.”

“Well, you’re the Censor; that’s your problem.”

“Please. People will die,” Atticus pleaded.

“People have died,” she replied, still refusing to look at him.

“And those people would have died in vain if you do nothing now.”

Virginia turned away from him, trying to make the decision she dearly wanted not to make.



“Alright...I’ll do it,” she said finally.

“Thank-,” he began, but stopped when she glared at him. He quickly reconsidered, and decided that a simple “Good,” would work just fine.

“Atticus,” said Claudia quietly, “There’s still the problem of the Senate Building being surrounded by people who’d probably like to kill you.”

“You’re right. And the people hiding in the National Archives have probably barricaded themselves in by now,” said Atticus. Sighing, he stuck his hands in his coat pockets.

He tilted his head slightly, and moved his right hand around in the pocket. It was filled with loose change. He looked down, and quickly realized that he wasn’t wearing what he thought he was.

“This...this is your jacket...” said Atticus slowly.

“So? It’s pretty much the same as yours,” said Claudia, motioning to the one she was wearing. That jacket was in fact Atticus’, and thus had a series of unusual stains on its left sleeve.

“I...I wore that jacket whenever I was out walking at night. It’s what I wore when those people thought I was the Nocturne Magician... Those people out there, they might hate me, but I am willing to bet they would be on good terms with him. Could you pass me my coat?” asked Atticus as he took off the one he was wearing.

“Are you sure that would work? Most of them have probably seen your picture,” asked Claudia as she slid it off.

“Maybe. Try messing up my hair a bit,” suggested Atticus.

Claudia leaned forward, and ruffled his hair, reverting it from the neatly combed style of a Censor back to the half brushed technique of a sleep-deprived academy student.

“Alright, now I’m going to send the telegram. You and Virginia wait for me out front. I’ll be right there,” said Atticus, “I think I saw the room it was in on the way here.”



“Virginia!” called Claudia, as Atticus left.

She turned at the mention of her name.

“It’s time to go,” she said, following Atticus out.

Virginia didn’t move at first.

Now that she was alone, the conflict between the questions within her, of guilt and justification, festered further.

She hadn’t wanted to kill him. But also, she couldn’t have allowed him to hurt Claudia. He had already killed too many of her friends.

Still, she felt a nauseating self-disgust. How could she not? When she had just rejected and foregone everything she had ever known.

She sighed and walked over to the threshold, stopping just before she left.

“I’m sorry,” she said to the bloodied corpse.

Then she walked out.



“*Revolution.*” Atticus rolled the word around on his tongue to see how it tasted. “*Reeevoolewshhhuun.*”

He stood at the very rear edge of the angry crowd. Claudia and Virginia had gone ahead since they didn’t need to conceal their identities to get through. Now it was up to him to make his way.

“It’s been long time since there’s been a proper revolution in this city. Back when our tyrant king was on his final leg, and so was the old world order. People were real pissed back then, just like today. They were pissed because their state had failed them, because of the oppression, terror, and injustice they had suffered at the hands of the people who governed in their name.

“And among those pissed off, was a young Senator named Filius. His father was a politician of great infamy, who was once



firmly in the king's pocket. His father had long fled to the countryside, taking with him an exorbitant amount of money, women, and wine. Had he only been a younger man than he was, he would have followed, chasing the allure of an easy life. But this was not the time to be a man that young."

Atticus glanced around. No one had noticed him yet, or the story he had begun to tell.

There was a small bit of concrete a little off to the right, broken off from a sidewalk slab and about the size of a bag of marbles. He picked it up, and studied it in his palm.

"So when the Senate was dissolved by that cruel old king, that pissed young man joined his peers in their secret meetings, and voiced his opinion loud and clear. The time for revolution was upon them. Many agreed with him. So they built their alliances and rallied their coalition, and more and more joined their cause. The bakers, with their over taxed loaves of bread, the artists and scribes, with their work dictated by the crown, the Cult of V, with their vengeful goddess of Virtue, and all the poor, downtrodden Plebians. And once everything was prepared, they went right to that king's bright, blue palace."

Atticus smiled, eying the Senate Building in the distance. It would be a long walk.

There was a dim, white light now emanating from his skin. But just before the first head began to turn in his direction, he launched the small chunk of concrete into the air.

It sailed with a will all its own, propelled by some unseen force besides Atticus' arm.

As it flew high above the center of the plaza, it exploded into a burst of extraordinary color.

Rich blues, reds, purples streamed across the sky, transforming it into something more like an oil painting than the usual endless abyss of air and clouds.

Everybody turned instantly and stared at Atticus.



Fortunately for him, the light around him had gathered sufficient strength to hide his appearance.

“It’s the Nocturne Magician,” whispered someone. Then another. And another.

The word spread through them like ripples in a human pond.

“Are you sure?”

“It’s that man from the papers, the magician-”

“The Nocturne Magician?!”

“Who else could it be?!”

Atticus felt a shiver pass through his body. Things could either go catastrophically wrong, or catastrophically right. It all depended on him.

He wouldn’t fail. Not this time.

He began to walk forward, and the crowd parted for him.

“So our leaders and revolutionaries came forth to this very plaza, Filius among them, and they said: ‘The state is not your power, it is not your righteousness, and it is not your right! The sovereign state is the people’s voice, and though you may have corrupted, distorted, and silenced that voice, we shall save our state! We shall save our state!’”

Now people were listening to him, and they began to chant those words.

“We shall save our state!” they shouted, with him.

As Atticus walked down the path made by the parting crowd, he felt overwhelmed.

He had never aspired to much really. He had always considered himself to be an incompetent person, one who couldn’t handle the responsibility handed to him. He had a single ambition to find someone to love him, and of course he was incompetent in that regard as well. Although, oddly enough, he had accomplished more in his life chasing those romantic ideals with the desperate



hope of some validation for his life than he would've had without them.

But now he had that validation, and he had proven to himself that he could have more than unrequited love in his life, he felt confident, for the first time, that he could fulfill his responsibility to save this state.

He smiled; he was almost to the Senate Building.

Up on the top step, he could see Captain Ilius and Tros Euxin, talking and pointing at him. For some reason, Tros' hands were bandaged. After a while, it appeared that Tros convinced him that Atticus was the true identity of the Nocturne Magician.

"Clear the way! Let him through! That's an order!" shouted Ilius to the Legionnaires and Praetorians, deciding in favor of faith of Tros' word.

As Atticus set foot onto the first step the light grew to a blinding extreme, letting Claudia and Virginia slip in with him without being noticed.

They were quick to make it to the shadows of the overhanging sapphire, and it was there where Clemens, Flora, Tros and Ilius swarmed around the three magicians.

"Censor Permisl!" exclaimed Ilius. "In case you might not have noticed, we have a situation here."

The crowd, no longer distracted by the flashing lights, had resumed its rioting and slammed against the line of Legionnaires. A bottle of liquor with a flaming rag stuffed in it exploded not too far away.

Atticus nodded. "Oh, I'm sure, and I have a plan to deal with that. But first, Tros, I need you to take a photograph."

Tros blinked. "Of what?"

"Us. At the moment."

"Oh..." He took that as his cue. After fumbling with the shutter on his camera there was a flash and a gentle snap.

Virginia flinched.



“Thank you,” said Atticus. He looked back to the Captain and his secretaries. “We are going to the roof. We’ll only need about six or seven minutes. That’s it. And I swear by all the gods, Heavenly, Earthly and Humane, no one else is going to die today!”

“Is that so...” came a questioning voice from deeper in the shadows.

There, sitting handcuffed against the wall was Mortis.

“You shut up!” spat Flora.

He licked his lips in anticipation.

“Just ignore him, Censor Permisc...and friends...We’ll take care of things here,” promised Clemens.

“Good luck,” said Captain Ilius to the three.

“Likewise,” said Atticus before making to enter the Senate Building, Claudia and Virginia in tow. As soon as they entered the atrium, they began to run.

“The access to the roof should be just down here, if I remember correctly. I mistook it for the paper storeroom once. When we get up there we’re going to recite the lullaby of the war of the heavens together, since it’s something we all should know. If we pour every ounce of magic we’ve got then maybe, just maybe, we can get this to work. And then-”

He stopped.

Virginia and Claudia looked at him with confusion.

“What is it?” asked Claudia.

They were in the middle of an intersection of two hallways, and Atticus was staring down the one adjacent towards where they were supposed to go.

“No...” was all he could manage: an utterance of total disbelief.

They followed his gaze and were quickly trapped in stunned shock as well.





In that hall was Serena Aurelius, flat on the floor with her head resting in a pool of blood. Her arms were sprawled out away from her body, and a pistol lay in her limp right hand.

Crassus, the Anarchist, kneeled over her, using his shirt to try and stop her bleeding.

“What did you do!” shouted Atticus, now running towards her.

“Nothing!” said Crassus defensively. “She did this to herself!”

Atticus glanced to the gun in her hand. “No. Please no...” he said softly, still in disbelief.

“She just ran up to us, pointing this gun around like a madwoman, and then shot herself. Didn’t even say a word,” said Crassus.

“Us?” repeated Atticus, glancing around wildly. “Where are the other Anarchists?”

“They’re all over the building, looking for you actually. I told them to go. But...I couldn’t leave her like this,” said Crassus. “She missed her brain. The bullet went through the bottom of her mouth and out her cheek. Lucky for her, she passed out from the shock a second after it happened. But if we don’t stop this bleeding soon, she’s gonna die. Trust me, I know a lot about blood loss.”

Atticus sank to his knees and joined Crassus by her side.

“I-I think I might know a way to save her,” he said.

“Hey, Censor. In case you’ve forgotten, we have to get to the roof,” said Virginia.

He shot her a glare.

“Or would you prefer me to not to try and fix your stupid problems?” she continued.

“Get to the roof!” he told her. “But I have to stay here and try to save her.”



“You were the one who said we’d needed all three of us for this to work,” she protested.

“Well then I was wrong. Because it is possible. It has to be,” he replied. “I’ve had this explained to me before, but I don’t think I fully grasped it until now.

“The world we live in is a composition of truth and lies. Fictions and realities. And those two forces are constantly fighting against each other. Reality won when Quintus died, when those people out on the streets died, and whenever any tragedy ever occurs because the world makes ‘sense.’ But the thing is, we get to decide the winner. We can tip the scales in favor of fiction and the immaterial because we are masters of both!

“Our existence is in open defiance of reality! You two especially! You were both conceived because even the universe doesn’t want to live with the truth all the time. So let’s give the truth a lie it likes! And let’s hope it saves the world!” exclaimed Atticus.

Virginia said nothing to that. She couldn’t.

After all, it was nothing but madness.

But Claudia smiled. She knew it was a beautiful madness. And it was in that madness she would put her faith.

“Come on,” she said, putting her hand on Virginia’s shoulder, urging her towards their mission. “We can do this.”

And so Atticus took the hand of his fallen friend, as the two young women sped down the corridor that would take them to the roof.

Claudia slammed open the door to the stairwell door without losing her momentum. Up and up they went, their quick, fleeting footsteps echoing back and forth like a staccato drum roll.

There was no time left to waste.

At last they burst through the roof access door, and met a chilly, windy air that whipped against them. The cloudy skies loomed overhead, only closer than before.



“This way!” said Claudia, running towards the far edge of the shattered sapphire dome over the Senate Floor. The temporary green tarp that protected the interior from the elements had broken partially loose, and was flapping in the wind.

As they passed the jagged edge of the broken ceiling, Virginia slowed, and look down. “Oh...” she whispered, realizing what she stood above.

Claudia glanced back when she realized Virginia had stopped. “We have to keep going. If we aren’t close enough to the center some people might stay awake.”

Virginia didn’t respond. The earlier hostility and bitterness she had shown began to vanish.

“It’s weird...I expected the bodies to still be there...”

There were some corpses left, but they weren’t the ones she had killed. Rather, a dead buzzard was there, having been shot after it wandered under the tarp, trying to get a taste of Senatorial blood.

Claudia watched carefully as Virginia took in the scene.

The violet-eyed girl swallowed and raised her chin, ignoring the wind whipping her hair into her vision.

“We aren’t going to the center,” she said defiantly.

“Why?”

“Because I need to see them...I need to see their faces,” she replied.

“Oh...alright,” said Claudia, still under the inspiration of insanity.

She took Virginia by the hand, and they proceeded to the very edge. They didn’t stop until the tips of their toes were at the very threshold between the blue sapphire and the open air.

From their perch atop the Senate Building they viewed Caeruleus City in its entirety.

The crystal and stone buildings of the rich no longer shined as there was no sunlight piercing the clouds to shine upon them.



The smoke stacks and rigid steel structures of industry no longer buzzed with activity and spewed their smoke, as the masses that propelled them had long taken to the streets.

However, the Plebian District and its tenant buildings remained the same in the gloomy light.

With its many buildings and rigid, geometrical squares the city appeared as a maze before the two. And at the center of that maze they could see the crowd amassed in the plaza, shifting and moving like a single living organism. The rowdy masses had begun to spear through the ranks of Praetorians and Legionnaires, despite the bravest efforts of Captain Ilius and his men. Some had resorted to using their guns, but for every second it bought them, they were forced back another foot. It wouldn't be long before they would be forced into full retreat and the chaos would flow like a torrent into the Senate Building.

"Are you ready?" asked Virginia.

"Yes," replied Claudia, pushing back any rebellious doubt.

The two magicians raised their hands, clasped together, and began the lullaby.

*"Child, why do you lie awake, crying in your bed?  
Does the world bore you, trouble you to tears?"*

*If I tell a story, to ease your pain, and dissolve your worry  
Would you be so kind, to sleep until the morning light?*

*Dearest child, do you wish to hear something incredible?  
This story is for you, my child dear: a sweet lullaby.*

*Go outdoors, leave our threshold behind and stand alone  
Feel the wind against your cheeks; the earth beneath your  
feet*



*Then look up, and you will see a vision worth your trouble  
Star and sun and earth and wind, the gods of men do  
whisper well,*

*These sisters and brothers of cosmic ore,  
Did not love each other forever more...*

*See the sky and see the earth dance their dance,  
Flying with affectionate love and romance.*

*Does this world's hearth warm you to bed?  
This story is for you, my child dear: a sweet lullaby is said.*

*Please abate your cries, young one, still your tears  
If not love then mayhaps tragedy will suit your ears*

*Stars, bright lucifers, hiding in their sky  
Roaring light and roaring lies until they say goodbye*

*From jealous rage against the strength of kind  
Came the war of heavens, surely one will die?*

*The sun, a kind and compassionate being,  
He gave blue to the drifting sky, an act of loving*

*But unfortunate fortunes came to this lord of light,  
The lucifer summoned wind swift and free to the fight*

*Look above and see them clash, and bleed and war unfurl  
See the sunlight blown out and the fires burn!*

*Does this world's hearth warm you to bed?*



*This story is for you, my child dear: a sweet lullaby is said.*

*Who shall win and who shall lose this wretched day?  
Vast blue skies and solid earth will come enter the fray.*

*Do you see!*” shouted Claudia and Virginia, but then they lowered their voices, and said the last few lines with the greatest gentleness they could summon.

*“...oh, never mind...I can hear your snores  
Sleep well my child, please...do sleep well...”*

From their god’s eye view, Claudia and Virginia looked down upon Caeruleus. Their hands were raised and the brightest, bluest aura glowed about them.

The soldiers, and guards, and rioters all slowed and paused, distracted by the two mysterious magicians who chanted and radiated light above them. Though the young women’s words were lost and dispersed in the swirling wind, they did not lose their power.

The poem had reached its crescendo and then its diminuendo, leaving the loudest of declarations behind for the softest of whispers. It was time for it to end.

A pulse of pure azure energy burst forth from them. It flew through everyone and everything, not stopping and not slowing, for as far as the eye could see. The magic did not simply reach the capitol and its attackers, but all of Caeruleus City.

The clamor of revolt grew quiet and the bustle of the city became slow and halted. The people blinked and rubbed their eyes, feeling their bodies grow sleepy and tired.

One by one and all at once those many, many men and women felt their legs sway and wobble before they fell. Some had enough sense to lay down on their own as they fell asleep against each other in a single, monumental wave. Praetorians, legionnaires,



secretaries, reporters and protesters all slept beside each other, indiscriminately.

The entire city was put to sleep with the simple lullaby. And last to succumb to slumber were the two magicians themselves, who were only just able to step away from the ledge before falling backwards, eyes closed, still holding hands as their backs laid against cold sapphire roof.

Far beneath the two Paphonians was Atticus Permisc, still tending to the wounded Blue Cap.

He chanted the same poem as they did, and he watched as his magic did its work, healing her broken head.

As the pulse of blue flew threw him, urging him to sleep, he added one more line to the lullaby that they left out.

*“Do sleep well..*

*But promise that you will wake up in the morning,”* he begged both to the universe and to Serena.

With that said, Atticus succumbed to the magic, and became a Censor deep in slumbering kinship with the Anarchist who had worked to save a dying nurse’s life.



## Chapter Sixty Four

### A Letter Regarding Recent Events

Citizens of Caeruleus,

Our country has seen many trials, tribulations and horrors in these past few weeks. These things have shaken us and our institutions to the very core. However, as a nation we remain intact.

I commend the Legionnaires and civil servants who have worked tirelessly and bravely in the face of overwhelming danger to protect innocent civilians and hold the country together. Without them, I might not have been able to write these words, and there might not be a republic to read them.

Three days ago, a group of rogue Praetorian Guards, under the influence of former Tribune of Justice Marcus Ursacille and his conspirators, went into the Plebian District and massacred seventy-two innocents under the guise of an offensive against the Anarchist group known as the Burning Fasces.

All of the guards involved have been apprehended, and are awaiting a military tribunal where they will face justice for their crimes.

As for Marcus Ursacille himself, he was arrested in the township surrounding Camp Invigilus along with eight more conspirators who were plotting to assassinate the Military Tribunes.

Understandably, there was outrage over the heinous killings in the Plebian District. Outrage which manifested in the protests in front of the Senate Building. Some protesters were under the





mistaken notion that my administration had sent the order for the Praetorian Guards to start rounding up Anarchists in the Plebian District in an act of retaliation for the bombing of the Senate Floor. According to the testimony of several of the captured conspirators, this was the intention of Marcus Ursacille. I reiterate that there has been no link found between the tragic explosion and the Anarchist group known as the Burning Fasesces.

The protests began to grow violent yesterday afternoon. If it were not for the valiant efforts of Captain Agrippa Ilius, his men, and the Blue Cap volunteers, the cost of human life would have been much higher. Nonetheless, we mourn the death of two protesters and one Praetorian Guard unaffiliated with the conspiracy. Their names were Lucius Caecilius, Sabina Adriano, and Amadeo Bonavento.

Our deepest condolences are extended to their loved ones.

During these protests, the previously mentioned Burning Fasesces assaulted the Senate Building in an attempt to destroy the Interim Government. While there were several wounded from their clash with the Legionnaires., there were no deaths as their attack was anticipated and necessary precautions were in place.

This loss of human life and civil attitudes is unacceptable. If it were not for the interference of a third party, known only as the Nocturne Magician, this violence would have spread farther and led to even more death and destruction.

As people awoke from their magic-induced slumber this morning, the Anarchists fled the premises and the protests that continued were largely peaceful.

Yet, even as the most critical hours have passed, and the terrorists are being brought to justice, the reasons for the protests have remained largely unaddressed.

Upon the submission of the people's grievances I announce the following reforms on behalf of the Interim Government of Caeruleus.



The Praetorian Guard leadership has been dismissed and a review committee is being formed from both military and civilian experts on how to create a new, more effective, more compassionate, and more ethical police force. Never again will those designated to keep us safe only serve the rich and bully the poor. Never again will we permit the corruption that infected our guardians.

As of tomorrow, Bill One-Thousand and Six will be passed into law. This law, which was being debated within the Senate before the tragedy, is designed to vastly improve the quality of life for the working class across Caeruleus. The exploitation of the Plebian Class has reached extraordinary levels in recent decades with the rise of industrialization, and the influence of industry in the Senate and Praetorian Guard. Many have died because of their employer's lack of sympathy and surplus apathy. Therefore all deaths occurring during work will result in a criminal investigation where management of the worker's facilities will be held responsible and possibly face manslaughter charges if negligence can be proven. In addition, an establishment of a minimum wage will be going into effect at four Sesterces an hour starting in six months' time, and the designation of labor unions as political parties has been revoked, therefore making them no longer criminal under the Caesar-Severus act so long as they do not give money or support for specific candidates. For further details see the full letter of the law provided at public libraries courtesy of the National Archives.

Several electoral reforms will also be implemented for the upcoming elections. These include the deletion of the current wealth requirement for Senatorial Candidates, the creation of a treasury fund for the payment of eligible Senators for their service, and the increased inspection by the Department of Revenue and the People's department into any corruption or fraud by any candidate or electoral organization. These measures have been



implemented to ensure fair elections and increased representation of ordinary Caeruleans in government.

Concerning the Burning Fuses: I am willing to offer clemency to any members who will lay down their arms and sign an affidavit to never again use violence as a means to an end. I understand that many of you made your choice to be an Anarchist in response to a world that is cruel and unforgiving. I am here to say that the world does not always have to be as such.

And finally, there is one more announcement I would like to declare. After Senatorial Elections and the formation of a new Senate, I will be stepping down as the Censor of the four-hundredth and seventh Caerulean Senate and will permanently retire from public service. This is not only the will of the people, but my own personal will.

I encourage you all to vote this February in your local polling place.

To all I wish a good day, and a peaceful night's sleep.

-Censor Atticus Permisc



## Chapter Sixty Five

### Punishment and Forgiveness

The day after the sleeping spell was cast over the city, Claudia brought Virginia to her home in the Plebian District to hide.

It was a humbling experience. She had been banned from the Burning Fases for attacking Agatha, and without them, this was the only place she had left to go. And since Atticus and Claudia were often busy with their own endeavors in the aftermath of everything that happened, she was usually left there all alone with nothing but her demons and guilt for company.

When she wasn't pacing around on the lower floor among all the concrete debris, she was on the second floor, staring out the empty windowsill, watching the world go by without her.

Claudia had spoken with Crassus. Apparently just about two dozen Anarchists had taken up Atticus' offer of amnesty, and only upon the condition imposed on them by Crassus that they wouldn't reveal any confidential information about the Burning Fases. She had been able to convince him to postpone any major attacks until they saw what reforms to the Praetorian Guard would bring, in exchange for the release of Felicia.

Virginia had learned of this when Claudia had come back with Atticus, bringing a bottle of wine to celebrate the cessation of bloodshed.

They acted like lovers to an obnoxious degree, spewing affection for one another, often awkwardly, like they had just discovered they could. It made her think of how Antony acted around her.



Which was why, on the tenth day of hiding in Claudia's home, she asked her host, "Is it right, for, you know, you and Atticus to be together?"

Claudia, who had been busy packing her things into her leather backpack, looked up at Virginia strangely. "Why wouldn't it be?"

"Well, he created you. Some people would object to your relationship solely on those grounds," said Virginia. "Antony created me for the sole purpose of turning Caeruleus into an empire. Maybe Atticus created you just because he was some pathetic, lonely guy. I'd hardly think that's a good thing."

"Frankly, I don't care what some people think. They're not me, and they're not Atticus," replied Claudia. "As for your second point: I believe that I am a lot more than the idea that made me. And I've been as much since before I properly met Atticus."

She went back to packing her bag, folding the last of her clothes and blankets.

"Besides, everyone is made up of a thought, ideal or fantasy as well as a fact, truth, or reality. I just happened to start out with a borrowed thought or two. It's actually something I thought about quite a lot while you and Antony had me kidnapped. I don't think anybody really gets to choose for themselves what they get in regards to those things in the beginning.

"But in the end, I guess none of those things matter in the face of the fact that I love Atticus. It's that simple."

She stuffed the last of her things into her now bulging bag, and closed it with some difficulty.

"Look Virginia," said Claudia, adopting a more solemn tone, "while I appreciate your ethical concerns about my relationship, I think you might have some bigger things to worry about."

"What? You mean how you're leaving me here so you can stay with Atticus?"



Claudia sighed. “No, not that...”

She reached behind herself, to the only article of clothing she had left out. “I bought this for you from a playhouse that was going out of business. I figured you could use something to protect yourself from the weather.”

It was a thick grey cloak with a hood and a purple inner lining. “The Sylvanians actually cast spells on their clothes so they never stay wet and keep their wearer warm. I suggest you try it out sometime. It could come in handy.”

Virginia accepted the gift with confusion. “Thanks...but I don’t understand why you’re giving this to me.”

Before Claudia could reply, there was a knock at the door. She got up, and opened it to reveal Atticus waiting there, a small brown satchel in his hand. She glanced back to Virginia anxiously.

“You ready?” he asked.

“Yeah. I take it you want to talk to Virginia.”

“Yes.”

“And you want to talk to her alone.”

“Yes.”

She nodded in understanding. “Just one last thing.”

She walked over to Virginia, hugged her, and said, “I’ll miss you.”

When Claudia let go and stepped back, Virginia was at a loss for words. Silently, she walked towards the door, where Atticus was waiting for her.

As she felt the chill on her skin from the outside world, she put on her new jacket and flipped the hood over her head to protect her ears.

Atticus cleared his throat, and looked distantly to the other side of the street.

“I apologize,” he said flatly.

“Why?”



“I can’t find it within myself to be as forgiving as she is. Or as Quintus was.”

“Oh...”

“You should understand,” continued Atticus, “as the executive of the Interim Government, I have the full legal authority to do things that normally cannot be done. For instance, I could have had you arrested without charges filed, then have you tortured, violently, before having you executed for the murder of all those Senators, Civil Servants, and Tribunes. Including the murder of Quintus. In fact, I can still do that.”

Virginia looked at the Atticus uneasily.

“I should also tell you I have the ability to grant you a full pardon you for your actions.”

She now blinked in surprise, wondering, briefly, if he was going to let her go free.

“But I’m going to do neither of those things.”

His expression hardened. “You took Quintus away from me. I guess a part of me still thinks that’s unforgivable. But...if you want to, then you may consider this your punishment and your forgiveness.”

“Consider what?” asked Virginia.

“You recall the photograph I had Mister Euxin take of us on the Senate Building? I had me and Claudia cropped out. That picture of you is currently being distributed across Caeruleus, along with a notice that you are wanted for being the last of the terrorist conspirators who destroyed the Senate, with the exception of a rather slippery Praetorian Guard Captain, and that the Caerulean Government is willing to pay twenty-five thousand Sesterces for your capture. Given current precedents I would say you have a seventy/thirty chance of receiving the death penalty for your crimes, should you face a trial.”

Her eyes widened.



“I suggest you take this,” he said, holding up the brown satchel. “In it are five hundred Sesterces, half a sandwich, a hunter’s knife, and a spare pair of socks.”

She took his gift numbly, and looked at the bag’s sparse contents with little comprehension.

“The Legion and Praetorian Guard have made you their top priority; they won’t rest until you are either caught or dead. There is no place you can hide. Therefore...you must run...”

Virginia didn’t move at first, uncertain of what she should do.

“Run,” Atticus said louder.

She hesitantly took a step back.

“**Run!**” he shouted. He pointed down the street as though ordering a disobedient dog. “Run for your life!”

Her eyes filled with fear, Virginia took another step back before skittishly turning around to flee.

She ran, and she sprinted, away from Atticus and his words that tore her life to pieces.

He breathed in and out heavily, and lowered his accusing finger only after her frantic footsteps faded to a whisper.

“Time to go?” asked Claudia from behind him.

Atticus blinked, breaking himself out of his furious trance. He turned to Claudia, who was leaning against the side of her concrete building, her bag over her shoulder. There were hints of sadness on her face.

He glanced once more to the shrinking figure on the horizon, and then looked away, eager to never see her again.

“Yeah, time to go.”





## Chapter Sixty Six

### A Family Mausoleum

There were still fresh flowers for Quintus in the cemetery. People just kept bringing them. They bid him a farewell with a hundred thousand petals, a hundred thousand *goodbye's*, *I'm sorry's*, and *You will be missed's*. And just like those words of reconciliation to a dead man, the petals would eventually wither, and be forgotten to the wind.

But as for now, Atticus laid his own offering of roses and peace lilies on the sweet-smelling pile. Serena stood next to him, and they both knew that unlike the flowers, the memory of Quintus Aurelius would never fade from their minds.

It had been four weeks since the riots. And four weeks since Serena had tried to kill herself.

Atticus' magic had done well enough to stop the bleeding and fix her up then, but its effects faded away two days later. Fortunately, she was in the hospital under observation when it happened, so the doctors and surgeons were able to take care of her. She had lost two molars, which they had replaced with synthetics, and was left with a large scar on her cheek.

"Does it hurt?" asked Atticus.

"No...not really," she replied. "They gave me a lot of pain pills at first. But now I'm trying to wean myself off of them."

"That's good."

Serena lowered her head, and looked nervously to the ground.

"I'm sorry," she blurted out quickly. "It wasn't right for me to do that. Was it? I was...confused...and angry...I didn't know. I



just thought, I kept thinking about how I needed to avenge Quintus. But that wasn't right. And I let him down, and I let you down everyone down. Didn't I?"

"Serena," Atticus began.

"It was my fault," she continued, as if she didn't hear him. "I was being weak. And stupid. I should have been out there, helping people! But instead I grabbed a gun. Why did I do that? Because I wanted revenge. That's funny. It really is. I've never tried acting out revenge since Quintus stole my pomegranate when I was ten. I hate revenge."

"Serena—"

"And I hate politics too. That was all it was...revenge and politics. I was horrible at both. And dad...oh, I let him down too...didn't I? I was all he had left, and what would he have done if I was gone?"

"Serena." Atticus' tone was stern that time.

She fell quiet that time.

"I accept your apology. And I'm glad you are aware of just how stupid your actions were," he said. "You were always a great friend to me, and a great sister to Quintus. I'm sure he thought you were capable of taking care of yourself. That you could be something great without him. I believe that too. I hope you don't intend on letting both of us down. But for right now, I just want you to swear that you'll never do it again."

She nodded quickly. "I swear."

"No, I want you to swear on something important," he reached forward and touched the cold granite mausoleum. "I want you to swear on this grave."

She didn't hesitate to put her hand right beside his on the stone. "I swear, on the grave of my ancestors, the grave my brother, and the future grave of mine, that'll I never try that again."

Atticus looked into her eyes, and he knew that she meant it. So he embraced her, like the old friend she was.

“I’m sorry if I was harsh.”

“It’s alright. I deserved it.”

“It’s just that...you’re one of the kindest, smartest, most ambitious and most beautiful people I’ve ever known,” he explained as he let go of her. “I don’t think I could bear it to see all that go to waste.”

“Thank you,” she said. She could hear the influence of that old school-time crush he had for her so long ago on his flattering description. “But I’ve still got a lot of flaws I need to deal with.”

“Such as?” asked Atticus.

“I care too much.”

“Hardly the worst flaw to have.”

“Maybe. But it’s brought me a lot of unnecessary suffering. I’ve been put on probation by the Valetudinarium, and as a part of that, they’ve been having me see a therapist. She’s been helping me learn that I’ve got to let go, of both my hate and a little bit of my passion, and be more detached for my own sake. It’s true that my tendency for caring has made me very diligent nurse. But it’s cost me pragmatism, and my own well being. So, I guess it’s time for a change,” she explained.

“Probably a good idea. But tell me when you’re ready to get back to work, and I’ll do my best to make sure you’re given your job back,” said Atticus.

Serena nodded graciously.

“Also... there were a couple of other things I wanted to tell you. You see, I...I’m going to be leaving. Once I’m no longer the Censor, I’m going to leave the city.”

“Seriously?”

“Yes. I’ve become too much of a polarizing figure. And I’ve gotten a bit too well known. If I’m ever going to have peace in my life, it’s going to have to be somewhere else. Claudia and I have been talking about it. We’ll be going together, but we haven’t decided where yet. Still looking into it.”



“Ah, you two star-blessed lovers,” she said as she picked up one of the flowers and brought it up to her nose. “I wish you two luck, for what it’s worth.”

She paused, as if she had just remembered something, and suddenly put down the flower and began searching through her winter coat’s pockets. “I wanted to give this to you,” she told him as she retrieved a small photograph. “I thought you’d appreciate it.”

It was the picture Quintus had taken of the three of them when they had gone to see that horrible play in the E/M District. They all had their eyes closed to protect themselves from the flash.

His smile was a bittersweet one as he accepted the gift. “Thank you,” said Atticus quietly. After staring at it for a moment, he carefully placed it into his breast pocket.

Serena looked over to her family’s mausoleum. “Did you believe all that stuff Tonas said about Quintus?”

“I do.”

“Then you think there’s some baby being born right now who will be the next host of Sol?”

“Oh yes. And they’ll have a legacy and destiny as great as any person could possibly hope for.”

“For sure,” said Serena. “He’s rejoining the land of the living, what do you say we do the same?”

She motioned towards Caeruleus City.

“I think that’d be most apt,” agreed Atticus as they began to walk away.

As they left the graveyard, the flowers were dowsed in the warmest sunlight of winter.



## Chapter Sixty Seven

### The Blue of Day

Atticus sat on the edge of the neatly made bed in the Censor's room, staring at the painting of the three person family in front of a cottage. He had recently learned that it was a rare original work by Pygmalion, the same artist who made the statue of Veritas in the plaza and was rumored to have made a wife for himself out of ivory. It was entitled "Truth, Lies, and Virtue." For some reason that Atticus couldn't quite explain, that little fact made him feel as though he was either looking at something very profound or very pretentious.

Claudia sat down next to him and rested her hand over one of his. They both had their bags packed, and there was hardly a trace left that showed they had lived in this room for over three months.

"You know... the more I think about it, the more I feel like I'm a really lucky man," said Atticus.

"How so?" asked Claudia, now resting her head against his shoulder.

He smiled. "Well, firstly, I've got you. And secondly, I don't live in a world that's ruled by anarchy or Antony."

She chuckled. "All things to be grateful for. Although I probably wouldn't have minded the anarchy so much. If you had to choose between the two, what would you have gone with?"

Atticus screwed his face up in thought at that question. "I suppose I would hate being stuck with Antony a bit more if for no other reason than because I'd feel it'd be a personal slight against me by the universe.



“But personal vendettas aside, I dislike the thought of them in power for the same and equal reasons. They were both so focused on overthrowing the government, the current system, by any means necessary. Sure, the system was corrupt, and the revolutionaries all those hundreds of years ago who established the republic were simply overthrowing a system they also thought was corrupt. And I’d be a fool to call what our founding fathers did unjustified or evil.

“The Anarchists thought everything about our system was corrupt, with the way the people at the top abused their power, the way they always will, and they had every right to destroy it. And Antony, well he just thought everything was messed up because our system didn’t embrace everything he knew as absolute truth. But the thing is, the people who founded the republic tried everything else first. And the system they were trapped in was intolerable and completely untenable. They didn’t have another choice besides revolution,” he explained. “I say, if reform is an option, it is always the best option.”

Claudia looked at him thoughtfully. “That’s easy for you to say, though.”

“Yeah, I guess it is...”

He took a deep breath. “I should probably go to the office and wait for Consul Agricola. He should be here any minute now.”

Claudia nodded, and they both got up. They carried their bags with them into the office in the Censor, but were surprised by two other visitors talking to Clemens and Flora.

“Captain Ilius, Mr. Euxin, to what do I owe this pleasure?” asked Atticus as he set his bags down.

“We’d thought we’d say goodbye before you left,” explained Ilius.

“And I wanted to deliver the morning edition,” added Tros, holding a copy of his newspaper.



Atticus gladly took it, and grinned when he spotted an article about his departure in the lower left hand corner of the front page. “Thank you,” he said to both of them.

“You know, you never did tell me where you’re headed off to,” said Captain Ilius.

“Surmona Arx,” replied Atticus. “I’ve heard it’s absolutely beautiful right there by the ocean.”

“It also has a sprawling entertainment district,” added Claudia.

“And thanks to the lobbying efforts of Censor Senescere, the Censor gets a whole year’s salary upon retirement, which has given us the funds to rent office space where I will finally start to put my degree to good work and start practicing law,” said Atticus.

“So you two are just going to settle down like that?” asked Ilius.

Claudia shrugged. “Better than staying here, with, you know, the constant threat of assassination hanging over us.”

“Yeah,” said Atticus, “I think the best thing for this city and for us is for us to stay far, far away. Too many people know who I am, and too many of those people hate my guts.”

“If that’s the case, the fault is theirs and theirs alone,” said a new voice in the room. They all turned to see that the freshly elected Consul Agricola had just come in.

He had won by a large margin in the Consular election, a triumphant return to politics after his humiliating defeat at the hands of Germanicus and his family fortune nearly two years ago. His platform of mandating portions of firm ownership to be split between the workers and a state fund for civic benefit while increasing factory safety measures had proven incredibly popular.

In less than an hour he was set to bring to order the first session of the four hundredth and eighth Senate, the most diverse Senate ever recorded. Over thirty-four percent of the Senators



were people who would not have been eligible for the position had Atticus not removed the wealth requirement.

“Censor Permisc, I understand that there is something you want me to sign,” he said.

Atticus smiled and took a letter from the inner pocket of his coat. “Consul Agricola, it is an honor.”

Agricola shook his head. “The honor is all mine. I know that it will take some time for this city to understand, but I want you to know that I, and many others, respect the choices that you made for this country. Perhaps one day you will be remembered as a hero to this nation.”

He took the paper, and a pen, and signed the letter of resignation.

“Nah, that wouldn’t be right,” said Atticus once he was done. “History would do best to remember me as a citizen who was simply doing his duty. And not even very well. I’m not a hero, wasn’t meant to be.

“Likewise, the Censor can be some people’s villain. And the Nocturne Magician can be someone’s hero if they’d like. People can remember it whatever way they wish. I’ve honestly forgotten where I placed the truth of the matter. But then, we don’t really need that, do we?

“In the end, I’m just happy that Caeruleus is back in capable hands,” finished Atticus, leaving out how he would remember his time as the Censor. As it really was: with all the illusions, delusions, and distortions that came with it.

Agricola chuckled. “I wish I could send you a better farewell, but the first session of the new Senate is about to begin, wouldn’t want to be late. So this will have to do.” He reached out and took Atticus’ hand; he shook it firmly. “Valé, Censor Atticus Permisc. I hope you have good travels ahead of you.”





With that, the new Consul released his hand and left, beginning a new age in the history of the Republic of Caeruleus as he passed through the threshold of the office.

Atticus breathed a sigh of relief, finally free of his stately duties.

“You will be going then?” asked Flora. She stood beside Clemens, and they both had a golden ring on their left hands. Atticus had been the one to officiate their ceremony five weeks ago in the Senate Building’s atrium, where the entire collectives of the National Archive and janitorial staffs were in attendance.

They all had pleasantly blurry memories of that day, and the celebrations that followed, which somehow led to the potted plant behind Clemens’ desk ending up clogged in a toilet in the women’s restroom down the hall. And now, the two secretaries were deep in post-marital bliss.

Atticus and Claudia exchanged a glance and then nodded. “That’d probably be best.”

Suddenly, Ilius stood to attention and saluted. “Farewell, Sir.”

“Thank you, Captain. If it weren’t for you, I don’t think I would have survived this long. None of us would have.”

“Well, like you said earlier, it’s all just a matter of duty,” he replied.

Atticus then turned to Tros, who took off his hat and placed it over his chest.

“I believe that Avian Hill Journal does print in Surmona Arx. I hope you’ll spare it a glance every now and then,” said Tros.

“I will,” promised Atticus. “Your articles were always my favorite, you know. They’ve actually gotten me reading the paper regularly.”

Flora and Clemens stepped forward.

“We’ll miss you, Censor Permisc,” said Flora.

“Yeah,” agreed Clemens.



Atticus looked to them fondly.

"You two better give my successor as much crap as you gave me," he told them.

"Will do," they said in unison.

Atticus grinned. He glanced around the room one more time, to all the friends he had made as the Censor of Caeruleus. His gaze landed lastly on Claudia.

He studied, for a moment, the curve of her cheek to her chin, the curve of her hair around her ear, and the curve of her lips into smile. He fell in love her once again, in that moment, as he did every other moment he had ever studied her.

Careful not to linger too long, Atticus cleared his throat. "Now then...I think it is time for us to take our leave."

He and Claudia picked up their bags.

"Valé," they all said to one another again as the two travelers left the office.

As Atticus and Claudia walked down the hall, they took each other's hand.

"And we're off..." declared Atticus.

"It appears that we are," replied Claudia. "I for one, feel fairly confident about this journey. Much more than the first one that led me to a faraway land."

"That's good," said Atticus. "And you know what else?" he asked as they made their way into the atrium.

"What?"

"You look absolutely beautiful," he told her as the light pouring through the tall open doorways struck her body.

Claudia blushed, but didn't hesitate to plant a kiss on his lips.

When they passed by those big ornate doors, the cold winter air hit them like an ocean wave. There was not a single cloud in the sky, but there had been sufficient ones present during the night to dust the ground with snowfall.



It covered the plaza and sapphire steps like a thin white blanket, restoring that odd balance to the color of the world, where the ground was pale and the sky blue.

Their boots left heavy treads in the snow as they took their path to the train station, where they would leave Caeruleus City, the only place they had ever really understood and called home.

Claudia gently squeezed her companion's hand. "Do you remember when I asked you if you would tell me your story?" she asked.

"Yeah, the morning after you saved me from that Anarchist assassin. I remember..."

"Well, now that we're done here, I want to know."

"It'll probably be pretty boring," he said.

Claudia scoffed. "No excuses. A deal was a deal."

Atticus stayed silent for a while as they walked past the statue of Veritas in the plaza.

"No matter what you say, or what story you tell, I'll always love you. You got that?"

He nodded.

"But I still want to know. Because I, well, I never got a chance to know someone for as long as other people. I've never really been sure if I've truly known anyone. And...I really want to be sure I know you..."

Atticus looked to Claudia with sudden understanding and then cleared his throat.

"Well...I'll have to come up with a good beginning. You might be able to start at your conception, but I should find a more reasonable starting point. Every story needs a good beginning," he mused aloud.

"Something profound?" suggested Claudia. Atticus drew his brow together, thinking hard about it. "Something mundane?"

He smiled. "How about both?"



Claudia smiled back. “In that case, where do we begin, dearest storyteller?” she asked.

“We begin at the beginning. In the grey of night,” said Atticus. “A young boy, sad, dejected and lonely stood outside his home. He shouldn’t have been out at night, but he didn’t care. And since he knew little of the friends he would have, the duty he had for his nation, the magic he commanded, or the love he would be blessed, he began to walk about...”

The two lovers, hand in hand, went down a city street, leaving the snow laden plaza behind. Statues of truth, sapphire halls of lies, and all the virtues of the city were bid farewell.

“...and he did not stop...”





## Acknowledgements

A hearty, hearth-warmed thanks to all my editors, Jonas, Julia and my mother and father, without whom you would be incapable of deciphering a single paragraph. To my parents for always being so supportive of me and this story. To Rachel and Emily for the beautiful artwork. To everyone who had to suffer through an emailed copy of the first draft. To the yoyo and stone jaguar on my cluttered desk. To Mr Holcomb and all my peers in IB Latin for first inspiring my interest in the classics, among other things. To Cornelia Funke who lit up the mind of my younger-self with her mastery of the written word. And to everyone who decided to muddle through this foolish tale to the very end.